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# THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW

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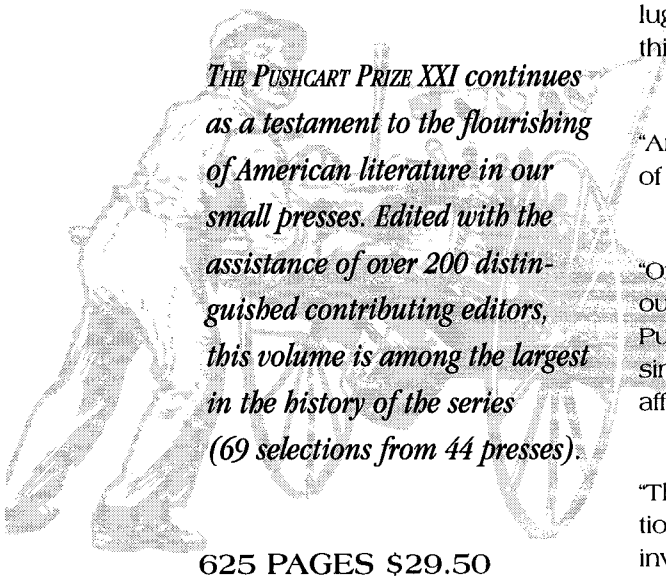

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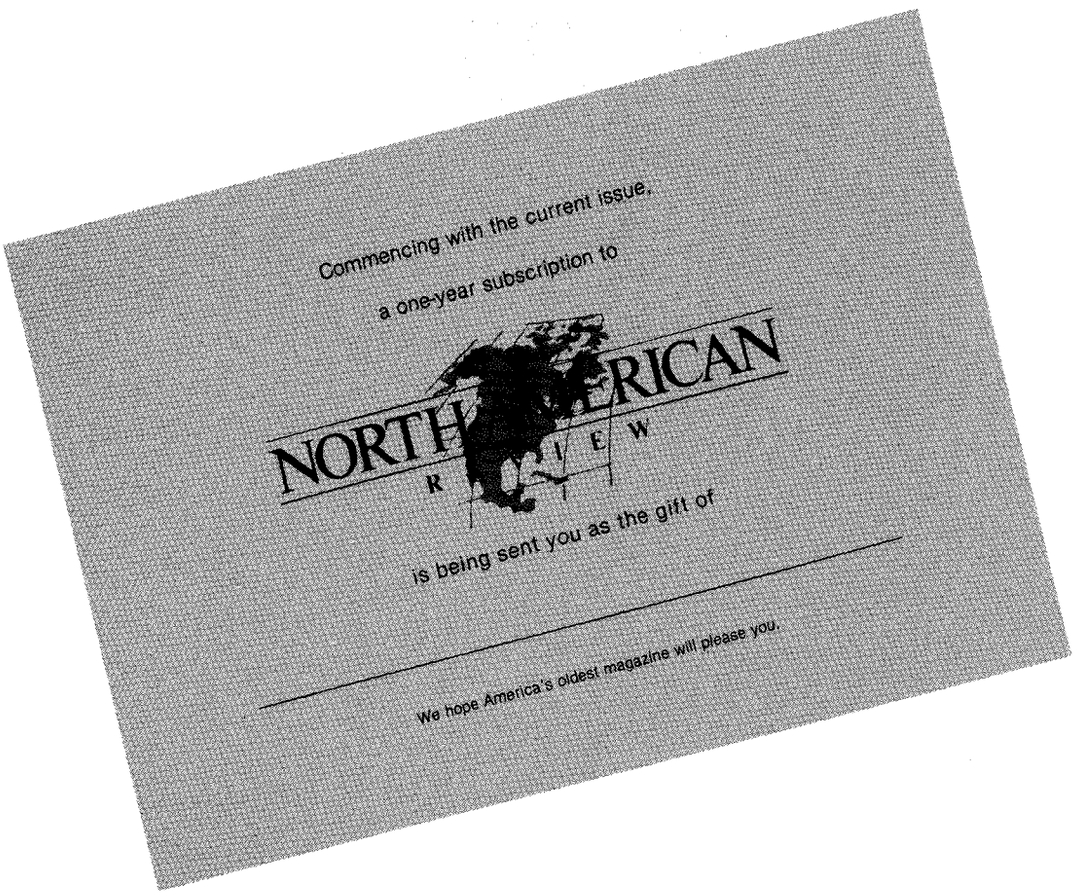
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## ABOUT THIS ISSUE

■

This number of the NAR marks the beginning of our 183rd-anniversary year and seems to focus on aspects of love—at least that's where the fiction leads us (though the paths are various and quirky), and even the essays concern themselves with the ways men and women show the world their affections and commitments. Mary Soderstrom treats a love triangle in nineteenth-century Montreal, Barry Sanders takes us to an East Coast freeway, and Aimee Bender shows why most of us think New York City is kind of a scary place. Gary Gildner's report on the occasion of Czechoslovakia's disunification (if that's a word) is rich with compassions and simple pleasures, and Marilyn Krysl struggles with the display of charity (another word for *love*) that can never be sufficient. Alas that life at the bottom of the century cannot be simple. Perhaps this magazine exists only so Constant Readers may find temporary respite....

A current-events note: We find ourselves following the Microsoft anti-trust saga with a certain interest, inasmuch as the NAR has been using the Macintosh operating system since long before our colleagues began posting "Windows 95=Macintosh 87" on their office doors. It would be curious indeed if the answer to "Where do you want to go today?" turned out to be "Prison."



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THE
# NORTH AMERICAN
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FOUNDED IN 1815 VOLUME 283, NO. 1 JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1998

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# The Case of the Missing *Auteur*

DENNIS DRABELLE

THE TRULY IMPASSIONED reader is a kind of *voyageur*. He rows past the ephemeral bestsellers and received classics in first-run bookstores, rests in the eddies of secondhand stores, and runs the rapids at annual mega-sales of used books held by prep schools and college alumni groups. In those spills and byways, he is poised for one of the bookish life's great pleasures: happening upon a neglected author who deserves to be rediscovered—a minor writer unjustly overlooked or a once-major one in eclipse.

The Frenchman Claude Farrère may be a bit of both. Though never a towering figure, he won the Prix Goncourt for his first novel, *Les civilisés* (The Civilized Ones, 1905), got himself elected to the Académie Française, and wrote dozens of books, most of which sold smartly. Yet as far as I can tell, today none of them is in print in any language.

Over the past 30 years or so, Farrère has become a pet interest of mine. As a college student intent on compiling a French-Lit reading list for myself, I first ran across him some time ago in something called the *Dictionary of the French Language*, a 95-cent paperback I pulled out of a drugstore rack in suburban St. Louis (you used to find the damnedest things in drugstores). The short entry on Farrère called his *L'homme qui assassina* (1907, translated as *The Man Who Killed*) "the perfect novel of adventure," and who could resist *that*?

It took me a while to track *L'homme* down, but eventually I found it, in a Livre de poche edition at the French bookstore in Rockefeller Center. As a thriller, the novel lives up to the *Dictionary*'s rave. It also delivers *frissons* of irony, features cross-dressing as a plot device, and scrutinizes manners and ethics among Istanbul's diplomatic set. ("When a woman cries," observes the narrator, "a man who is neither her friend nor her lover can only pretend not to notice.") *L'homme* is so steeped in its milieu that on the last page the book's composition is dated to the year 1324 of the Hegira.

For years I kept an eye out for more Farrère, to no avail. Then, at a second-hand bookstore in Washington, D.C., I snapped up a hardback copy of *La dernière déesse* (*The Last Goddess*, 1920), a ripping World War I novel marred only by an implausible denouement (two lovers of the same woman just happen to be the only soldiers left standing at the end of a battle). Several more years went by, and then, on a visit to Quebec, it occurred to me that my quest might be more fruitful in a Francophone province. Sure enough, in a second-hand bookstore in Quebec City I picked up paperback editions of *Les civilisés*, *La bataille* (1909, translated as *The Battle*), and *Thomas l'Agnelet* (1913, translated as *Thomas the Lambkin*).

*Thomas l'Agnelet* is an adult pirate story, well-done if you like that sort of thing (I discovered I don't). But *La bataille*, set in Nagasaki, and *Les civilisés*, set in Saigon, are as colorfully engaging as their Turkish brother. In *La bataille*, the Japanese characters have been aping Western ways, to the consternation of the protagonist, a French painter enamored of the country's past; when the 1905 war with Russia breaks out, he exults in the spectacle of his Japanese friends throwing off Occidental trappings and renewing their warlike traditions. In *Les civilisés*, the failure of an otherwise appealing French colonial officer to curb his extracurricular debauchery crushes the proper young Frenchwoman he has been courting. Close to a century after they were written, these are still among the worldliest of novels.

So worldly, in fact, that they went over some readers' heads. One was the young Julian Green, born in 1900, now a venerable novelist still living and writing in Paris. Green has admitted in his autobiography (recently published in English translation) that he didn't understand the sexual passages in *Les civilisés*, which a *lycée* classmate had lent him as the latest word in "salacity." Another early Farrère novel was about prostitutes, whom he portrayed even more sympathetically than Balzac had.

Farrère's life itself makes good reading, at least in the thoughtful 1989 biography *Le cas Farrère: du Goncourt à la disgrace* (The Case of Farrère: From the Goncourt Prize to Disgrace), by the French historian Alain Quella-Villéger. Farrère's real name was Frederic Charles Bargone, and he lived from 1876 to 1957. Before becoming a writer, he was an officer in the French navy. His second career began with a flourish. He entered a short-story contest by mailing in a manuscript while on shore leave; the judges gave him a prize, and his entry was folded into his first book, *Fumée d'opium* (1904, translated as *Black Opium*). He became a protégé of Pierre Loti, another French naval officer who specialized in fiction with exotic settings.

A big, bearded man whose hair went prematurely gray and then white, Farrère was still in the service when his early novels appeared. After transferring to the army and fighting in the tank corps



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during World War I, he retired and wrote full-time. In 1932 he came out of mothballs long enough to be a hero, throwing himself in front of French president Paul Doumer and taking two bullets in a failed attempt to prevent the latter's assassination. Later in the '30s, Farrère flirted with fascism. He was not an anti-Semite or a collaborator but rather an admirer of Mussolini before Hitler got to him—a stance that seems of a piece with Farrère's passion for the East's refined bellicosity and his scorn for the West's decadence. He was a great friend of Colette, whom he called "*la femme de ma vie.*" In his forties he married an actress; he continued to have affairs, but the marriage lasted until her death in 1950. For much of his life he was an opium addict.

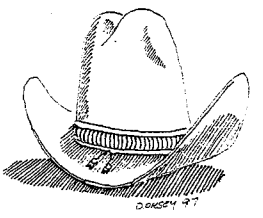
The "disgrace" of Quella-Villéger's subtitle, by the way, is hyperbole. It refers to false accusations that during World War II Farrère actively supported the Vichy government. However, as Quella-Villéger tells it, Farrère beat the rap and continued to write and publish prolifically.

His 1936 election as an Immortal, over Paul Claudel, had caused a *scandale*—partly, I think, for the same reason that Graham Greene never won the Nobel Prize: to some critics, fiction that entertains a wide audience is suspect. Greene also happens to be one of Farrère's closest literary analogues. Both writers couch their brisk stories in a dry irony that underscores human follies, and *L'homme qui assassina* can be read as a companion-piece to Greene's *The Heart of the Matter:* each portrays a main character with sound—perhaps compelling—reasons for breaking the moral law against murder (be it of another or oneself).

Reference books noted a falling-off in the quality of Farrère's later works, but of course I wanted to see for myself. Not long ago, on my first visit to Paris in 25 years, I took time out from the museums and cathedrals to go book-hunting. No luck in the new stores or even the shops selling *livres d'occasion* (second-hand books). But a French friend suggested that I try the *bouquinistes* along the Seine—those small-time entrepreneurs who sell books, prints, and trinkets out of carts—and there I hit paydirt.

The carts must have numbered over a hundred, arrayed along both banks of the river, and I stopped at every one. Most proprietors wrap each book in cellophane and write the author's name on the top pane, so the customer can flip quickly through the wares. Making the rounds was work, I guess, but only in the sense that visiting 100 tiny, cheek-by-jowl bookstores would be work—for a bibliophile, hardly at all.

I came away with ten Farrère titles, most of them novels. They weren't cheap ($200 for eight trade paperbacks and two hardbacks), but some were in mint condition and autographed by the author. Once or twice I haggled, but mostly I didn't mind paying what the *bouquinistes* asked because I'd like to see them endure as an outlet. We have nothing quite like them in this country—the nearest equivalent may be a book stall at a flea-market, but typically what's spread out there is mass-market dreck, whereas many of the *bouquinistes*' items were choice. On a subsequent trip to Toulouse, I continued my search and picked up four more titles.



I've been reading the new acquisitions as fast as my middling French will allow: Farrère's syntax is straightforward, but he has the roomy vocabulary of a man who's been places. (The ten or so of his titles translated into English are out of print and hard to find, although the Library of Congress, for one, has them.) *La maison des hommes vivants* (1911, translated as *The House of Secrets*) is an engaging, if bleak, foray into science fiction. *Les hommes nouveaux* (1922, New Men) tries to do for Morocco what *L'homme qui assassina* did for Turkey, but the local color is pallid in comparison. Best of the lot is *Une jeune fille voyagea. . .* (1925, A Girl Traveled . . .), a charming proto-feminist tale of adventure set in the Far East. So far, though, I can't say that any of the later works measures up to the first three novels—the Exotic Trilogy.

On the other hand, Farrère is almost never dull. His literary virtues include swift plotting; evocative scene-painting (in *L'homme qui assassina* he compares the filmy mist hanging over Istanbul to the down on a plum); loving evocations of Eastern cultures; and a savoir-faire that the reader enjoys being made privy to (you might never put opium-den etiquette into practice, but being versed in the fine points is its own reward).

When I asked a savvy-looking *bouquiniste* how such an appealing writer had dropped off the shelves, he said that Farrère was out of favor with the young. Which, of course, explains nothing: How can you be *in* favor when your books must be stalked like game? My own theory is that Farrère has suffered from a general French embarrassment over its colonial literature and perhaps a specific distaste for his martinet's exoticism. Like Quella-Villéger, who distances himself from his subject's politics in a prefatory note, I limit my regard for Farrère to his storytelling prowess. But then (to choose an author Farrère himself lionized) I'm not fond of Kipling's white-man's-burden streak either, yet I can enjoy *Kim* and "The Man Who Would Be King" with a clear conscience.

I expect to be back in France soon and hope to do more collecting. Conceivably the news that an American is going around buying up Farrère titles will percolate up through the *bouquiniste* underground. The French, you may recall, are old hands at shining *lumière* on American artists and performers who have been underrated in their homeland: Edgar Allan Poe, Josephine Baker, Howard Hawks and other *auteur* directors, even Jerry Lewis. I wouldn't mind returning the favor by reminding the French what a good writer they have let slip through their hands in the person of Claude Farrère. □



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# Madurai: Temple Beggar

MARILYN KRYSL

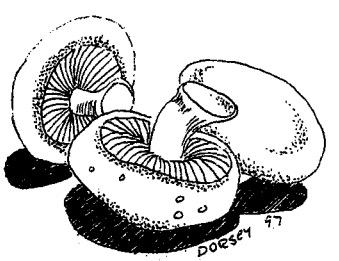
MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S HEAT. We left our shoes at the entrance. The halls were laid out in a cross, four entrances for the four directions. Rows of stone pillars marked the way to the central cella. We had entered holy space.

To go barefoot on stone is to be *grounded*. I'd have said *stoned*, but my Indian friends might not have got it. We'd come because Chitra, her husband Nimal and his brother Raj wanted me to see the puja. I knew what to expect. The drumming's relentless and everybody gets way down, whooping, the pusaris in trance, shaking uncontrollably, dancing around on stiff legs, upper bodies flopping like dolls, invoking Mother Kali all fingernails and teeth, tearing the universe to bits.

But we'd come too late. Stalls selling incense were closed, and the women who string garlands for the altar were packing up for the night. I didn't mind. I wasn't in Madurai as a tourist. I'd come to visit the Gandhi Museum where, six months earlier, my friend Betsy Moen Mathiot had died of a heart attack. My grief took the shape of avoiding the tourist spots. I'd spent a few ritual mornings just sitting outside the tiny room behind the Museum where Betsy had lived, watching crows in midday heat pick at rinds. Being attentively present had seemed appropriate.

Betsy had established a base in Madurai and made forays out into the villages to research female infanticide. One way it's done, she'd told me, is to drop a grain of rice down the baby's windpipe. I remembered her voice, throaty, like Bacall. She was a handsome woman, together, as we say, and busily productive. She'd lived a life of cheerful outrage, loyal to her Quaker vows. She'd helped several villages start clinics, co-ops, women's support groups. At the Museum she'd founded a state women's organization, the Valliammal Society, which published adults and children's books, operated a pre-school for otherwise abled children, and kept support flowing to the villages.

She'd had many friends, and when she died, they'd come together to perform her funeral. When it came time to light the pyre, there arose the question of who would torch the tinder. If you're Hindu, there's a person whose ceremonial job it is to do this. But Betsy was an American Quaker, these hundred odd people who were her friends were Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Catholics, atheists, and this ritual was spontaneous and outside official channels. Finally one of them went off and bought packages of candles. The candles were distributed, and the mourners formed a ring around the pyre. They lit each other's candles around the circle. Then they stepped forward, each with one candle, and set the pyre afire.




Now three of her friends wanted to show me a good time. "Let's go on, just for a look," Chitra said. "We can explain some things about the ceremony."

JUST A FEW PILLARS IN I saw the young beggar woman. She was probably in her twenties, though she looked already ravaged. It was partly an act, I knew, but not entirely. Her dirty sari was calculated to get to the tourists, but it was also her sari. And there was the jutt of matted hair, tied off. My mother would have called this jutt a rat's nest, but here it signaled a sort of infernal divinity. It's Hindu practice to marry girls as young as seven to the temple god. They tie off part of the girl's hair, which she is never to comb again. The jutt signals the marriage has been performed.

The woman was a *devadasi*, which translates, pragmatically, as temple prostitute. When Betsy first explained this sacred "marriage," I'd imagined it resembled nuns marrying Christ. Indian girls are supposed to marry, and a hefty dowry's required to bargain your daughter a husband. But if she gets chosen to be a *devadasi*, the family doesn't have to come up with dowry. They get paid something from the temple coffers. They're home free. It's like winning the lottery. The girl gets to wear saris sooner than otherwise, which little girls long to do, and other girls and their families are envious. Even boys envy the attention. But the girl can forget school. And there's sex, before she wants it. The attendants can have her whenever they want her, and she picks up whatever's going around. Nor can she leave and start over: she's no longer a virgin. No one would marry her now, even if she has been the wife of a god.

The woman had a little girl by the hand, a child so thin I didn't want to look at her. They sat on the stone floor, the woman talking, the little girl listening intently.



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I didn't see the man, though he must have been close by.

Where there are beggars, policy develops. Some Indians set aside a certain portion of cash to give away each day, some gave spontaneously when they felt moved to, some refused to give on the principle that begging is a self-destructive practice that shouldn't be encouraged. I'd also witnessed what looked like indifference—smartly dressed, middle-class Indians stepping around a beggar as though that hump of flesh were simply another pile of muddy clay thrown up where the underground drainage system had ruptured. I didn't have a policy. On some occasions I'd rushed past a beggar in the hope that I wouldn't have to confront, just then, the question of my own charity. Occasionally, feeling generous and effusive, I'd give away all the money I had with me. I couldn't seem to make logic apply.

The fact was the little girl was too thin. I had to acknowledge this, and I had to acknowledge that it was a fact about which I could do little that would once and for all improve their circumstances. This argued for dropping a few coins into the woman's hand, then going on to the cella. Chitra, Nimal and Raj ignored the woman, chatting away as though we were the only ones present. If I hadn't been there would they have given her something? If I broke away to give her something, would I embarrass them? What, I wondered, would Betsy have done?

THE REMOVAL OF SHOES casts us into the commonality. Barefoot on stone, I felt my human nakedness. I was not separate from this arrangement of space, from the air in the passageway, from the feet of thousands of others who had also walked barefoot on this stone. The repetition of pillars, one after another, began to feel incantatory. This is ritual space, and I am the rite. Leaving the lighted entrance, going down toward the cella, I turned inward. That I'd passed by the woman without giving made me uneasy. Betsy, I felt sure, would not have passed by. Betsy engaged what confronted her. Woman by woman, man by man, she had spoken. *We cannot refuse parts of creation and reject other parts. Women and girls are of the creation. The rice grain down the windpipe is a refusal of creation. What gods there are do not want this.*

I was becoming way too casual about whipping past someone else's suffering, and I was not pleased with this self image. While I meditated my situation, Raj and I fell into a conversation about Krishna. Raj launched into an explication of a passage from the *Gita*. The sort of bloodless detachment the *Gita* advocates goes against my American grain, and the passage Raj had settled on has always sounded to me like war mongering. Krishna says to Arjuna *go ahead, ride into battle tomorrow and kill all those people. They're as good as dead already, and so are you. If you die tomorrow you'll go to heaven, and if you live, why there you'll be, alive. But you don't get to choose: you have no power to influence fate. Therefore it's best you detach yourself from the fruit of your actions. Throw yourself into the action and accept whatever transpires.*

"It reminds me of a general beating his breast," I said. "It reads like propaganda to convince young men it's heroic to offer themselves as cannon fodder."

Raj's tactic was simply to repeat the verse that seemed to most appropriately to address my caveat.

"Krishna says if you die, you shall be in heaven. And if you live, you shall be here on the earth in your victorious body."

"Either way you can't lose. O.K. But it doesn't address the issue of war. Arjuna doesn't want blood on his hands, and I can understand that."

"The key," Raj says, "is to become detached. *Detach yourself from the fruit of your actions.*"

I wanted to believe, as Betsy did, that we can make a difference, but in India I'd begun to suspect I could not make a difference. The odds against this feel like a trillion to one. If you do make a difference, it will be a difference the size of a pea. Even if you're in a position to endow a school or hand over a hefty sum to Mother Teresa, this sum will disappear almost instantaneously into the great sea of suffering that surrounds you as you walk a little way off the main drag in any of India's great cities.

At best that fact can invoke humility: you're reduced to dropping a few *pais* into the palm of the nearest cripple on the street. The smallness of that gesture reminds you how insignificant you are.

On this occasion it had seemed to me a given that no amount of money I might give this woman and child would substantially change their circumstances. But this was the application of logic. Betsy would not have bowed to logic. She would have gone forward on her own personally devised sacred logic, a logic which permitted miracles and enabled her in each situation to act in significant ways, ways that made a difference.

DETACHMENT IS NOT a Western virtue. We like the feel of being in control that comes with claiming responsibility. We expect results from our actions. We invest in the stock market, not with detachment. We can also, like Betsy, be willfully, deliberately generous. In the matter of actually giving cash, the closest thing to detachment is tithing. Tithing is simple and efficient, just more of the bookkeeping. No need to deliberate moral dilemmas in their quirky contexts. As long as you don't allow tithing to turn generosity into empty ritual, it has the advantage of consistency and regularity. But was there a way to use the principle of tithing with beggars? You didn't know when you'd meet them, or with how many your path would cross in a given day.

I wanted a policy. But the more I thought about it, the more it seemed you had to be ready to address each individual beggar spontaneously. Maybe that wasn't fair—because you'd end up giving more to some, less to others—but it



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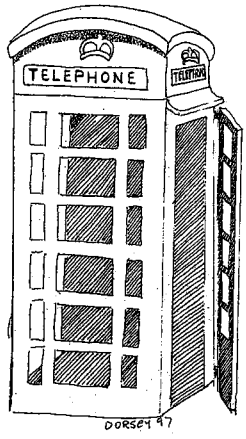
seemed authentic. It meant you had to stop each time you met a beggar and address that person's situation in particular. You had to be present, to confront the situation. So why hadn't I given the woman something?

I'd convinced myself that what I could give wouldn't really make a significant difference in her life. But who was I to judge this? How could I presume to know what would or would not be significant for her? I couldn't. And therefore I ought to have simply acted generously and given her something. Charity is the kind of thing you shouldn't think about, I reminded myself. *Just do it.*




WE'D ARRIVED AT the holy of holies where they burn the camphor, smear their foreheads with ash. Nimal was quiet, preoccupied perhaps, or maybe just in a devotional mood. Chitra and Raj filled me in anecdotally. Dutifully I stared at the mannequin's painted nails, the four blue arms, but I couldn't get interested.

Finally we started back past those monolithic pillars, colonnade after colonnade. I saw the entrance ahead of us. There they were. The little girl was curled up on the stone floor, asleep. The woman's arm lay across her back as though to protect her. My friends were debating whether to hire a rickshaw or take a taxi. It occurred to me that the body is transitory and insubstantial, but while you're in it, it is also very real. At first I was glad that wasn't me over there. Then this attitude seemed cowardly and self serving. I'm suspicious of pity, which sits next to condescension. *That could be my body*, I thought. I remembered certain moments when my daughter was a baby, when I couldn't tell my body from hers. I thought of the physicist David Bohm. He calls the common ground that connects everything to everything else *That-Which-Is*. We're all in this together, whether we like it or not. Our problems can't be solved separately. *That could be my body*. Actually, I thought, that *is* my body.

Then I saw the man, a little way off, disappearing beyond a pillar. He was moving back the way we'd come. He was giving me room.

Where resources are scarce, scams are inevitable. This one was so stylized it was practically Kabuki. The mother's arm, trying to protect the child, was a brilliant touch. Trying, or seeming to try. And was she the mother? The man might have bought the child from a family that needed money. It happens. I imagined him orchestrating the scene before me. To be fair, I tried to imagine the shadowy ones above him, pulling his strings.

I despised how they'd planned it, but I couldn't leave it either. Behind their calculated, exaggerated tableau lay real suffering. What I had on me was a thousand rupee note, about twenty dollars. It would seem like a lot of money, because most people who came here would give much less. It wouldn't do much, though it would do a little something. But I also had to acknowledge it wouldn't be hers for long. Ultimately it would belong to the man.

I knew I couldn't have the impossible, but that didn't stop me from wanting it. I wanted this woman to get leverage. I wanted my money to give her an edge on leaving the temple for good, taking the little girl with her. I couldn't have that. Still I wanted her to have the money, just have it. If she were allowed to keep it, to use it for herself, that would constitute a modest but tangible victory. It was what Betsy would have wanted, I thought. Betsy would have given her the thousand rupee note. Betsy would also have given her phone numbers and an invitation printed in three languages to come to the weekly women's group meeting.

The woman saw me coming. Possibly she had a daily quota and she hadn't made it, and I looked like an agent of the gods. Possibly she'd made her quota and I constituted an overage. Possibly she was torn to pieces by the hunger in the child's eyes and her own failure to provide. Possibly she believed in the inevitability of karma and so did not experience guilt, but saw her situation and the child's simply as terrain to be negotiated. And possibly she was simply too weary to have scruples and wanted only to sleep the sleep of exhaustion.

The man, wherever he'd gone, was probably so good at this that he'd already guessed almost exactly how much money I'd be likely to give her. Suddenly I didn't care. I was undulant. *Krishna, look: I'm here in my victorious body. And this one's for Arjuna.* Arjuna and Betsy, I thought. The woman saw me coming and stood up. I'd folded the note small. Now I pressed it into her palm, closed her fingers around it. There was that ancient, preadamite moment: we stood inside that moment like a rite.

I thought very quickly how none of us will long survive the downsizing of the gods. Then I hurled myself away and went after my friends, hoping the man hadn't seen me. If he hadn't, he might not bother to search her. Though he probably would, it was probably what he did, maybe even the part he liked best. He would grope even the child's dress, feel every fold of the woman's sari, each crevice of her body, and he would find the note, unfold it, see how much it was, claim it as his. Even if he were also kind, if he were tender, sometimes, toward the woman, affectionate with the girl, still there would be that other moment, the moment the woman dreaded, the moment I had wished deeply to prevent. The moment when he wouldn't let her keep the money. The moment when he would take the money from her. □



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BOB HICOK

# A Little Blasphemy

No one in Ibsen kisses when they talk about death
but even the cutlery in *A Doll's House* broods
so strenuously it hums. We are smaller than art
and more nervous, deprived the focus of a cunning
metaphysic but not the huge appetite of our couch,

where we sank after the Memorial in our mis-matched
blacks, sleeve against whispering hem, bones
and words batched in collapse after the stiff
fatigue of proper distress. So we kissed and talked
and didn't talk and didn't kiss, for awhile

twined and then apart, this is how continents live,
is fear why the moon makes it clear it's always
ready to hide? I remembered being made to kiss
an uncle, you a grandmother, your body shadowed
by your mother's as you stood in the conga-line

of grief, then hoisted, then told to say goodbye
to a lace dress wearing closed eyes. This
is turning a child's head inside out, schooling
hands, lips in a backward faith, a belief
in the *no* that waits inside the husk of promises:

the vow of love, the oath of flesh. If God prefers
we whisper and rend, each kiss is blasphemy,
our souls will be scattered like wrens
inside the appetite of the sky. Yet we kissed
again, bewildered by mourning less carnally dressed.



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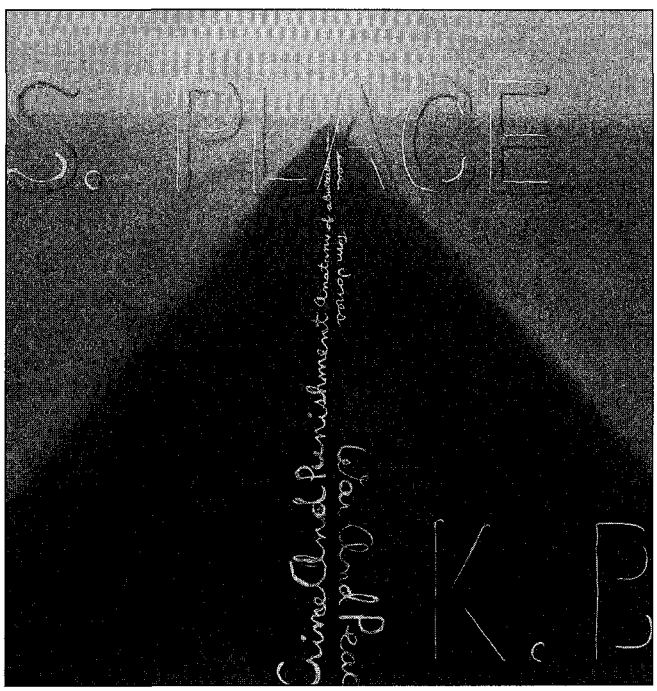


*Barry Sanders*

# DOSTOEVSKY IN THE *FAST* LANE

Patton must have come on the accident just after it happened, because traffic had not yet backed up that far. Cars still parted either side of the wreck, a river branching in two. All those drivers, in a hurry to make it on time to jobs they only barely tolerated. But that's not what seemed so odd. Something else made this accident feel different from every other Patton had seen. Something about the way all those small objects—so many of them—lay scattered all around. In the outside lane Patton's eye caught a glimpse of a hardbound book sprawled open like a traffic fatality—a dead man flat on his back, both arms flung out—so vulnerable, so awfully vulnerable. Off to his right, he spotted a few more books.

As he drove a bit closer, he saw more and more books—squares of color really: red, dark blue, bright blue, rich browns—scattered across all four lanes. It made him feel as if he were driving through a movie screen, right into the midst of a bizarre film. And now, as if following some direction, some unspoken law of accidents, not one more car drove around the wreck. Like a machine running out of steam, everything came to a gradual halt. In the fast lane, just near his left front tire, where his own car now rolled very certainly to a stop, lay a copy of *Crime and Punishment*. No ordinary, dog-eared and worn-out copy from God knows how many readings he nearly crushed beneath his wheels, but a leather-bound classic from the 'thirties, one of those limited editions with gilt-edge pages and gold-leaf filigree impressed deep into its soft leather covers. And since his car had stopped right there, Patton took it as a sign, got out, and retrieved the treasure.

How strange, this accident in bookland—a fairy tale gone awry, a story loosened from its moorings. Standing in the throughway, he could, with three or four little jumps, catch a glimpse of what had happened. A bookmobile, it looked like, one of those libraries on wheels that makes the rounds of schools and hospitals and shut-ins, had flipped over on its side, sending its contents—hundreds and hundreds of novels, collections of short stories and essays, books on history, hagiography and geography, self-help books on dieting and disciplining children, love letters and biographies and autobiographies—sliding out onto the tarmac of the eastbound Hagartown Throughway. Lots of them lay wide open, as if to give angels, or anyone else who might be flying over, a chance to slow down, break up the monotony of just another early morning commute, and read.

Books that had been kept carefully apart on the perfectly discrete shelves of the library suddenly found themselves lying spine on spine next to each other. The Dewey Decimal System gone mad; the Library of Congress out of control. All rules of civility and order abandoned. Gunther's *Anatomy of Butterflies* rested next to *War and Peace*; the standard biography of Joan of Arc

BENJAMIN SIGMUND



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literally fell face down on top of *Tom Jones*. The whole world had rearranged itself—quite by accident.

As he looked around, he saw other drivers out of their cars, and they, too, probably for lack of anything else better to do, began picking up whatever book lay near at hand. A young executive, his BMW idling lazily, leaned against the driver's door with a copy of *Lolita*; a burly construction worker had chanced upon *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, and was laughing loudly enough to attract other drivers to walk the few steps and look over the shoulder of the hard-hat to see what he found so amusing. Listen to this, will you, he chuckled, will you just look at this, the guy is in-fucking-sane; and he stubbed his finger into the page. A retired air-traffic controller, on his way to his Wednesday morning golf game, spread an oversized book on the hood of his car, quickly losing himself in the coffee-table wonders of Tahiti. The earliest rays of sun, striking at such a low angle, cast an illumination on each photograph, so that palms and sand and water came stunningly alive. Tahiti, itself, could not have looked better. July 18th, on the Hagartown, a most remarkable scene: scores of men and women standing beside their cars as if in some great outdoor library, lounging on the freeway, unconcerned about the delay, content for the moment to be simply reading.

The sun hung at just the right angle: a willing accomplice, it gave up its light without the bothersome glare of an incandescent bulb, or the deathly glow of fluorescence. Patton had gotten through the first line of *Crime and Punishment*, that book he had heard so much about, practically his entire life, but had not read beyond the first line, just another one of those books he would, as they say, get around to. Now. oddly enough, it got around to him: "On an exceptionally hot evening early in July a young man came out of the garret in which he lodged in S. Place and walked slowly, as though in hesitation, towards K. bridge." The sentence took him back some twenty years, to the time when he had first intended to read the book—on a European trip with a buddy from Brown—and had even, on his meager budget, purchased a copy of it. Europe in the old days: cheap flights on Icelandic Airlines, and even cheaper living on Frommer's *Europe on Five Dollars a Day*. He had opened *Crime and Punishment* one dreary morning marooned in a Swiss hostel during a freak summer storm. Then, too, he had not made it past the first line; his mind wandered, his attention drifted off the page to...a dream, a wish maybe, of locating S. Place and K. Bridge someday, of coming upon those two lonely letters in the vastness of Russia. S and K: he wanted to know their full names. Dostoevsky had turned him into a detective in that very first line.

Patton had bought his battered paperback at Shakespeare and Co., a bookstore tucked into a Parisian side street, address Kilometre Zero, well known to anyone who really liked to read. Actually, he bought it right off the proprietor's desk. He could still remember his name—Grant Whitman—great great grandson, Whitman claimed, of the good grey poet. The book came trailing so many dreamy associations that it took a very long time before he allowed himself the pleasure of breaking it open and looking at a single word. He carried the book around from one small town to the next, cushioned safely in his rucksack, like a delicate vase, between layers of shirts and socks, waiting for just the right time to attack it. Where had the book been, he wondered, who had touched it? Who had read it? Maybe some famous writer, or better yet, some underground unknown, struggling to stay alive. And after just the first line—read at sea level, the foot of Mont Blanc, in Chamonix—he found himself walking and talking and eating the way Raskolnikov, he imagined, might have done, plotting every detail of even the simplest events, just as he believed every fully conscious person ought to do. His new-found, quirky intensity bugged the hell out of his traveling buddy, Bob Solido, so that they finally said so long in Innsbruck. Forever. Old Bob, sweet Bob, the buddy he would never forget, had slipped away. And the book...well, God knows where that went. Lost, along with the old life.

Patton laughed at the schmaltz of it all. But, now, another thought snapped him back to the present. That truck on its side, those books spilled all over: surely, the driver must be hurt. So far, Patton had heard no sound of a helicopter, no ambulance siren. The accident had not yet become a newsbreak on early morning talk radio. He ran the quarter of a mile or so down the shoulder of the road and peered into the fallen bookmobile. With the van turned over that way, it was like looking into one of those chocolate Easter eggs with the sides cut out—a tiny glimpse of four or five bunnies at play in their spun-sugar world. Inside, he saw a woman still strapped into her seat, in her late thirties, not much more, looking back at him. She was clearly conscious. At least her very tentative smile seemed to a be a conscious one.

Pressing his face to the glass, he yelled through the window: "Are you okay?" She nodded. Then, in exaggerated, open-mouthed gestures that gave her a look like a large fish, she said, "Get me out." By standing on the fender and pulling with all his might, he managed to yank the door open, mumbling a few comforting words as he began taking books off her—*Huck Finn* lay on her neck, several particularly fat volumes—Gibbon, it looked like—weighed on her back. *The Golden Bowl* had struck her on the right temple, but with little apparent damage. He unsnapped the belt, and pulled on her arms, gently, easing her from the pile like an avalanche



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victim—trapped under a load of words—or a buried treasure, recovered from the past. Her hands felt soft, which made him pull even more gently; and there was her face, round and full cheeked, with deep-set eyes punctuating her pale white skin. Then came the rest, tall and lithe (Levi's and hiking boots—bright red laces, he remembered that well)—more pulling and pulling—until he had delivered the whole driver, and set her softly on the shoulder of the freeway where she could gather her wits and orient herself once again. She had, after all, been lying on her side for some time, and he brought a wholly new perspective. Her padded jacket helped protect her. Here it was, July, and she looked dressed for November. Patton passed it off as the clothing for dramatically early morning work.

"My God, I'm embarrassed," she stammered. "Oh, that's silly, I know. I'm not embarrassed. I think I'm just upset." Patton took his jacket and laid it down behind her, the way he had seen good Samaritans attend to the comfort of victims. She looked at it strangely. "Well," she suddenly exclaimed, stretching her arms over her head, "I'm, alive! Got to be thankful for that. I am alive!" And then after a short pause, "Aren't I?" Patton nodded, which gave her the go-ahead to add, "Or have I landed in librarians' heaven?"

"As far as I'm concerned, you couldn't get any more alive," he said with a big grin, "and shh, people are trying to read."

He pointed back at the stretch of freeway behind them. And for the first time she slowly took in the whole scene. One of the busiest throughways on the Eastern Corridor—perhaps in the entire country for that matter—had become an eerie place of absolute stillness: on the eastbound side, dozens of people standing in their own lanes, sitting on fenders or bumpers, and happily reading; westbound, drivers slowing down to gawk at the most exciting and certainly the most bizarre event they had ever witnessed on the morning commute—a great stirring of literacy. The mobile library had immobilized the freeway.

This is no accident, she thought. This is fate, delivered between hard covers into the hands of everyone out there—if all of this is really happening, that is. In a few more minutes, an hour at the most, the mess would be cleaned up and they would both be gone forever. She looked at her rescuer, his loose frame leaning against the center divider, light brown hair blown lightly this way and that. She had conjured the sharp features of just such a face before, she realized, while reading maybe, or perhaps in a dream. Or in an overworked wish. But no matter, he seemed as familiar and reassuring, as solid as the shape of a book.

"How did it happen?" he wanted to know.

She tried to recall the exact order of things. "My mind drifted for a second—I don't remember why—and I lost control of the wheel. The next thing I knew I was in the left lane. The fast one. So I swerved back over. The whole left side of the van went flying—Twain, James, Hawthorne—all went whizzing past me. An entire century of American Lit flashed before my eyes." She stopped to catch her breath. "Then I swerved the other way—back left. You know, to compensate." She looked to see if he believed her. "That's when I got it. I mean, think about getting whapped by the OED. N-POY hit me on the side of the head." Her face relaxed. "The whole world toppled. And there I was, on top."

He tried to imagine such a wild literary scene: All those characters airborne, sailing past each other inside that little metal world. "Could have been worse," he offered, "could have been driving a diaper truck." The librarian stared at him in amazement. He seemed unabashed, unembarrassed—even in front of the small group of people gathering around them. He went on: "Do you realize what a service you've done for America? How you've changed entire lives? Just when people are asking for everything to be real?" Patton paused long enough to check her expression, liked what he saw, and went right on: "Here's my theory. Want to hear?" She already knew it would be impossible to stop him: "Sure." "O.K., I've been thinking about this lately. The *real* went out of the world around the time they took the static out of the radio. My old man used to pull his chair real close to the Philco, trying to hear Fibber McGee or Jack Benny or Fred Allen. 'What'd he say?' Every few minutes my old man would ask, 'What'd he say?' I made up an answer. Who cared? Hearing the radio was wonder enough. Now, unless it's absolute clarity, people get weird. No fuzzy stuff, no listening to two stations at once. It's fine tuning, and they think they've locked into nothing but the truth."

She shook her head in disbelief. Librarians' heaven, after all. Whoever this person was, he was either crazy or damned interesting, and she didn't at the moment much care which—she wanted more. She didn't really understand everything he was saying, but she knew he had been shaken loose from some science fiction story and she wanted more.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Patton." He said it fast and clipped, like *batten* or *fasten*, secure and glad to get it over.

She looked startled: "Patton's a general's name."

"Patton Cartwright. My old man's attempt at upward mobility. Don't hold it against me. I used to hate it, but after a while...well, what the hell. I'm beginning to like it."

She couldn't resist: "Sounds like Patton pending." Before he could come back, she blurted out: "I'm going to call you Patrick instead. Maybe even Pat, I'm not



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sure yet." She was still sitting on the shoulder of the freeway, giving whatever she had to say, even the most ordinary of things, an odd context.

"O.K.," he said, with so much sarcasm she knew he was kidding, "let's hear your moniker."

She laughed: "You got it... Monica."

In the meantime, more people had gathered around them and had grown more and more impatient—for what, they probably couldn't be sure, but they wanted change, something different to happen. They had, after all, been pulled out of the ordinary for over a half-hour now, and they were starting to feel a bit nervous, the way a robber might who lingers a bit too long inside a convenience store. Maybe they didn't know exactly what it was, but a good many of them began to feel the horrible itch of the everyday and the ordinary starting to get under their skin. "Hey, are you all right," a few of them wanted to know, "really all right? We ought to get going. Pretty soon." She assured them she had no broken bones by standing up, finally, and shaking her arms and legs in a spastic, comic way, which sent them all rushing back to their places.

"Let's take advantage of the situation," Patton announced, "let me read to you."

"Read?" she said. "Out here?" And then she realized there were more people reading than not. "All right, but you have to fill out the rest of the application. You left *occupation* blank. I don't let just any stranger read to me."

"Commercial artist," he answered, "Coopers and Branlow—advertising agency. Plus, I get to write a little copy now and then—when the boss loses all reason. DWM, slightly older, prefers women, and likes cilantro an awful lot. Perhaps famous writer in a previous life—umm, probably Shakespeare. Sagittarius. Scorpio rising. Owns no Barry Manilow records. Does not eat frou-frou food, has no clue what *Last Year at Marienbad* is all about—though he's discussed it many times, and faked answers several more times. And, yes, Woody Allen is amazingly neurotic." He pretended to be out of breath.

If she had known the guy one more hour, she would have given him a serious pinch on the cheek. "You're hired. Read me that." She pointed to the elaborately decorated volume by his side and sat down on the highway again, like a kid waiting for a bedtime story. He squatted next to her, just to be slightly higher, a little raised, as a parent might.

He cracked the book at random and, as fate would have it, brought that young man, Raskolnikov, to life just as he was about to commit his monstrous deed: "'He had not a moment to lose. He pulled the axe quite out, swung it with both hands, scarcely conscious of himself, and almost without effort, almost mechanically, brought the blunt side down on her head. He seemed not to use his own strength in this. But as soon as he had once brought the axe down, his strength returned to him.'" As he read the passage, he raised his arm in sync with Raskolnikov. When the axe reached the top of its arc—the reach of the narrative, as well—Patton's arm dropped with a dull thwap on his thigh. Monica jumped as if she had been struck.

"My God, you've got murder in your heart! Or else you acted that out too well. I should get you a slot in the 740s: Sociology of Deviance."

"No!" he protested. "No. I've just been waiting a long time to actually read that scene; it's been stored away up here for twenty years." He tapped the side of his head. "Really." He said it pleadingly, but with determination, like a kid trying to extract a special favor from his mother. "Besides"—and here he waved his hand aside, clearing the air for his next statement—"besides, it happens early on in the novel." Then his tone changed sharply; he became lighter and more jokey. "Anyway, you can't talk. You just might find some evil thing like murder floating around in your own heart, too." Patton leaned very close to her and got overly dramatic just to take the edge off: "An oil slick of crappy thoughts on the smooth highway of life. Ha!"

She countered right away: "A priest does not have to believe in God to do his job well. And a librarian certainly does not have to read every single volume in the place to be counted a lover of books." She folded her arms and gave him a self-satisfied, playful smile: "And anyway, who wants to read about murder?"

"A priest might pray like an angel, but he won't convince a single soul," he said, standing now to flex his legs, "if he doesn't believe in God." He liked the way she stood up for her ideas, and decided to push a bit.

She brightened, as she saw the perfect opening: "You mean, if there *is* a God, Saint Patrick." She stood now, too, uncomfortable with their different levels.

Then he: "See, you're practically thinking like that creep Raskolnikov. Don't you think you could possibly consider murdering someone—under the absolutely precise, perfect conditions? (Present company excluded.)"

She snapped back: "No! And I'm not keen on discussing my capacity for murder smack in the middle of the freeway."

The sun glanced off her cheekbones and illuminated her entire face, a moment so dazzling it made him speak without thinking: "Beautiful."

"What?"

"Exactly. What if someone were, let's say, attacking your... husband?" He was fishing.

"Let them attack all they want. I don't have a husband."

"Good. Well, what if they broke into your house and attacked your...aging mother? Two huge piano-moving



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monsters from Fargo, North Dakota, with their bear paws around your mama's throat? What then, Santa Monica?"

She made her right hand into a gun and pointed it at the top of his nose, slowly cocking her thumb back: "Then I'd blow their brains out with this 40-something automatic at point-black range. And become a Russian epileptic and write a long novel baring my Siberian soul to the world. Or else..." She held the finger-gun to her own temple. He grabbed it away, holding her hand a bit too long perhaps. They went on joking and playing around.

Who can blame them for acting like two kids in an abandoned house? Who could pass up the chance of a lifetime: To take over the throughway? We think places like that will never change. They become so familiar we almost forget they're around. Then, in a split-second, like a miracle, or a tornado, the place suddenly gets redefined. You have to re-orient your entire life. You're a kid again. You'll never die. You'll always be forgiven. No big mistakes; no crying over spilt milk. One winter morning the old swimming hole freezes over and there you are—skating on its thin skin. Ten minutes ago, commuters were driving like mad up and down the freeway, just as they had done every morning for the past forty years, their cars leaving a trail of smoke, bits of invisible but deadly asbestos and rubber. Now...well, everything's still. It isn't that the cars have stopped—that happens all the time in traffic jams—but the freeway itself has stopped. Some huge hand has ripped out the ever-beating heart of America. Capitalism has had a stroke. Commerce is bed-ridden. The Hagartown Throughway—old faithful—now an auditorium, a dance floor—a library. Look at them all: reading between the lanes.

Monica laughed out loud—at her new friend, at herself, at this insane morning. At the freeway turned topsy-turvy. "Read. Read and re-read," she said, "I've never had such a good time on the shoulder of the Hagartown. The wrecker's going to come by soon and tow me back to reality. So let me hear what I've been hawking over the years. But not that, no Dostoevsky. Try those"—she pointed to a small pile of books near the call-box—"the ones that tried to kill me."

He sorted through four or five and called out the titles: "*Biology made Clear and Simple*, *The Lives of a Cell*, *The Double Helix*..."

"I thought so," she interrupted, "the 400s revolted first. That means the 800s ought to be right behind us, near the right tire. Find me a sweet 800, lyric poetry, or an 884.6, ghost stories."

Patton walked around the fallen truck. "Eureka!" he shouted after a very brief search, "*William Butler Yeats: The Collected Poems*, 1964, Macmillan, tenth printing. Last checked out, let's see, two years ago. Sound good?"

She signaled her approval with a thumbs up.

"Jesus, listen to this," he said as he walked back over to her, "'Love is all/Unsatisfied/That cannot take the whole/Body and soul'..."

"Whatever it means, it doesn't sound like murder."

"Close though. It's Crazy Jane...and you know the next step..."

Before he could go on, a loud chorus of horns went off, and a growing line of drivers, who had never made it to the books, now demanded that everyone move the hell on. Those with books shouted them down, insisting on their rights: "Be quiet, can't you see we're reading?" and, "Hey, not now, I'm right at the good part." Some even passed the remaining books down the line of traffic, fire-brigade style, in hopes of shutting up unruly traffic-mates, feeling sorry for those too far down the line from this great stirring of words.

A few westbound drivers—Lookie Lous, the Highway Patrol calls them—had stopped to survey the scene. Like kids shut out of a baseball game, they pressed up against the concrete wall dividing the two directions of the freeway. All the commotion got them fired up: "Let them read, for God's sake, this is a free country—the library's the last thing we've got that's still free. So shut up and wait." Three or four of those westbound butt-inskies even had paperbacks in their cars and tossed them over the divider to the frustrated westerners: "Read these." Two Barbara Cartlands came sailing back over in a graceful arc: "No thanks! We'd rather be stuck in traffic hell."

Suddenly, a siren from a highway cruiser broke the activity. The trooper approached in the carpool lane, and made his way over to them, the lights on top of his car, in the midst of such a bizarre morning, looking for all the world like a carnival announcement. The car, too, had lost its authority. The trooper took over, urging people back to their cars, issuing firm orders and giving directions. "Is everyone all right here? Ma'am, were you the driver of the van?" Monica nodded. The officer relaxed a bit when he saw that no one was seriously hurt. "We've got to clear this mess up," he announced, "and get these books off the road. This is a freeway, not a public library." The librarian and her new friend chuckled at the comparison. "Well," she said smiling at the officer, "it is the free way to read." She got the cop to smile faintly. "You must not be hurt," he said. "Just my pride," she joked.

Drivers obediently trooped by the bookmobile, slowly depositing their volumes on a stack near the overturned van—long-lost friends reunited. The librarian checked the books in, thanked each person, as if she were still behind her desk. A few times she even



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caught herself looking at the due dates. One woman, a legal secretary, handed over her *Wuthering Heights* tearfully, muttering something about poor, poor Catherine, others jotted down titles to remember what they had just been reading, marked their places by noting page numbers, and shuffled back to their cars. Still others wrote down the names of the new friends they had just met: Lady Brett, Henry Fielding, Fanny Assingham. Reluctant to surrender their books, people moved awkwardly and sadly, and much too slowly for those who realized, once again, that they had jobs waiting somewhere in the city. The officer tried to keep things moving along at a steady pace; he remained cool and polite, even though he was having a difficult time against the flood of words.

Only one man, older and slightly frail, was now holding things up. As soon as he returned his book and got back in his car, a '62 VW bug, traffic could begin moving again. The old man was the last reader. And he had everyone waiting. But he kept his book open all the same—a 1937 edition of *Moby Dick* with Rockwell Kent illustrations—and refused to stop reading. Which prompted two delivery men to start screaming at him. Then a few other people—one an absolutely irate women, who had gotten half way through *Lord of the Flies*, walked over and began threatening the old guy. The librarian and her new friend stood in shocked silence. Monica managed a gasp: "Oh my God, you've got to do something." And Patton instinctively yelled out: "Hey, leave the poor guy alone. Let him finish his chapter at least." But that only infuriated the group even more—"It's six hundred pages, for crissake"; "Buy your own copy, you old cheapskate"; "Somebody tell him how it ends and send him home." The *Lord of the Flies* lady began taking out her frustrations on the old man's shoulder.

Moving from this place to that, working frantically, like a plumber unclogging a tangle of pipes, the officer now dashed over to cool tempers off and straighten things out. He took some device off his belt and called for more help. The old man looked up, stuck the book in the air, and proceeded to instruct everyone in earshot on the principles of correct civil behavior: "Look, it says here evil is obsession. So everybody slow down, Look close, please, you'll see I'm not a whale. Please stop acting like a bunch of bloody Ahabs. This is how mob rule begins. Look at the French!" The air controller yelled back: "Hey, in Tahiti they speak French. And that's no damned mob."

Monica sensed escalation and pleaded with her new friend again: "We've got to do something fast. Go help out." And she pushed Patton out into the melee. He jogged over to where a handful of people were jostling each other, and shouted in his sternest voice to stop, to cut it out, to leave the old man alone. Couldn't they see he was doing exactly what they wanted—only at a slightly slower pace?

"He called me an Arab!" someone shouted. "He called me an Arab, too," someone else added. Across the way, a man in a smart brown suit stared angrily at Patton, pointed an accusing finger at him, and snapped out: "You started this, buddy, you got everyone reading. I saw you. So just watch it, because you're going to get it next." Patton called him a stingy-ass pawnbroker, but he meant to say stockbroker. The trooper made his third or fourth request for calm, this time at a very high pitch, like some hysteric—clearly, he needed more help—asking everyone to kindly return to their cars. Brown-suit muttered something nasty, raised his middle finger high over his head, and headed for his car. In the corner of his mind, though, he thought he heard footsteps getting louder and louder behind him, which finally made him look around. What he saw was Patton Cartwright holding a handsomely embossed, gilt-edged copy of *Crime and Punishment* over his head; and he was about to bring it straight down, with the force of both hands, on Mr. Brown's unprotected, carefully-groomed executive head.

That was months ago. The throughway is clear now, back to a kind of normal that characterizes all throughways, all over the country—solo spin-outs, as they say, vehicular fires, cars and trucks flipped over and flattened out, an occasional mattress in the number two lane, a minor oil spill, and assorted dazed animals. Monica has been forced to trade places with a fellow worker; she has been transferred inside, to the reference desk of the downtown main branch. People should come to us, Monica now insists, we shouldn't haul the books all over the place. Her freeway friend, Patton, is out on bail—the guy she now affectionately refers to as the Phantom of the Fast Lane.

A few books, stained or asphalt scraped, have had to be replaced. She has begun to read Dostoevsky, slowly but deliberately; or rather, it is being read to her. The library copy, in the standard Constance Garnett translation, 472 pages with the epilogue, is checked out to the Phantom, and each time they meet she forces herself to listen to twenty, sometimes thirty pages. She wants to understand murder, and what gets killed in the end. Patton has had the book out for a while now, but he knows he doesn't have to worry, for she simply re-stamps his card every time the book comes due. And he escapes any fine. The book occupies a special place in her apartment, on a shelf over the mantle—a literary shrine to their chance meeting.

Sometimes, though, when Patton starts to read with that peculiar animation of his, a slight chill of fear runs through her, as if he had disappeared into the story as one of the main characters. But even that, even that has



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begun to give her pleasure. A librarian has to be more than an accountant, that's what the accident has made her realize. She had swerved to avoid hitting the future, and her Phantom friend had been sent to pull her from that awful jam. Which has made the two of them decide that he should plead guilty to assault and battery—with one great extenuating circumstance: He was merely an innocent bystander overcome by a powerful Russian image that had remained locked inside his head for twenty years and only that morning had escaped. He struck out in anger and frustration, and that very book happened to be handy. That's not what the court wants to hear. They want the truth of *now*, not the fiction of some remote past. But Patton knows better. He knows that a great hand, that the great hand of Raskolnikov reached out from nineteenth-century Russia, reached out past Patton and this accident, and struck a stockbroker in a brown suit. But that's no defense. Patton knows that's no defense in a court of law. He and Monica are expecting the trial very soon. And to prepare for that day, they plan to read Dostoevsky a bit faster—to that place where the burden of Raskolnikov's conscience grows too heavy, and he turns himself in. The state trooper, impressed by the old man, is three-quarters of the way through *Moby Dick*, and says it's a hell of a fish story. He'd like everyone to forget the whole incident—to forgive each other without all the court hassles—because he knows that sometimes people get desperate. They lose their tempers and lash out. Besides, it got a whole freeway-full of people into a library of sorts, a place most of them hadn't been for years. And as far as he's concerned, that was a public service. So he says, Drop the charges.

But the charges weren't dropped. Patton decided to defend himself, mainly because he thought he needed no defense. He also elected to testify on his own behalf. Right off the bat, the prosecuting attorney, a young man recently out of law school—at least ten to fifteen years younger than Patton—asked, "Why did you do it, Mister Cartwright?" Patton leaped at the question; he looked out at Monica sitting in the fifth row of the courtroom and felt himself going right for the question. "Why did you do it, Mister Cartwright?" That was from advertising, that question, a world he knew all too well. And he was going to use it in his own campaign. He'd been too quiet for too damned long. Clarity. One station. Fine tuning. That's what they wanted. Patton smiled at Monica, and knew he was on the right track because she covered her eyes.

"I didn't do it," Patton answered.

Just what a young lawyer wants—stupidity, righteousness, call it what you want, Patton had stepped into the trap. "We have eye witnesses. My client saw you do it, Mister Cartwright."

"Well, I mean in a sense I did it—but only in the narrowest sense." Patton smiled as he talked, which the judge read as arrogance. "I was at the right place at the right time. You know how sometimes you merely tiptoe into the facts. Actually, it's more like the events were aiding and abetting me."

Without looking up from his paperwork, the judge instructed Patton: "Mister Cartwright, this is a court of law, not a class on metaphysics. I must instruct you to answer the question directly, or I will be forced to find you in contempt. Repeat the question, counsel."

Meanwhile, Monica looked at Patton and mouthed: "Are you all right?" Patton smiled back, "I'm fine," and shook his arms to indicate no broken bones. Monica slumped down in her seat.

The lawyer looked puzzled but continued: "Mister Cartwright, why did you strike my client on the head with a hard-bound copy of *Crime and Punishment*?"

Patton straightened up in his seat: "I struck him because he was obstructing justice."

That line was good for thirty days and a five-hundred dollar fine. Patton joked that the judge threw the same book at him—crime and punishment—and gave him an extra sentence on top of it. Monica was too scared to laugh. Actually, Patton got sentenced twice: Thirty days for contempt, and thirty days for assault and battery. Sixty days in County Jail.

Monica visited him there. She got to see him forty-five minutes every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, in the visitors' room. Two hours on Sunday— more intimate time—in the rec room. She got that much time alone with him because she claimed to be Patton's fiancée. Patton liked the lie. He took to calling her his "gun moll." She called him "Dutch." The first couple of times she visited, they just chatted. But on the first Sunday, she surprised him by pulling out of her purse their special copy of *Crime and Punishment.* In a corner of the rec room, she read to him, noting the date in the margin, the way some prisoners mark time by cutting notches in their chairs or desks.

Other inmates wanted to know what was going on with "the book." And Patton told them his fiancée, a librarian, was teaching him how to read—a story about a guy who kills a stingy pawnbroker. They wanted to know all the details; Patton retold the story in the same rec room to his new pals during the week—with great and vivid details. In some places, he even added a bit of gore. Strange, how it made him feel more like a writer, those little embellishments. The following Sunday, a few of the guys hung around and listened in. Even then, Patton couldn't resist explaining what Dostoevsky was up to—at times retelling a scene in his own words, acting and gesturing vigorously. By the end of the month, four regulars each Sunday awaited their dose of Dostoevsky. A pickpocket named Bartell said whoever



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wrote that book must have murder on the brain and should be locked up. He knew guys like that and they were too dangerous to have around.

Patton got released before they reached the end of the book; Monica promised to drop off a copy at County Jail, so that Patton's jail buddies, she joked, wouldn't be left hanging. Monica and Patton continued to see each other on an irregular basis—for movies and dinner, or most often for just hours and hours of rambling talk. Since he no longer worked—a mutual agreement between Patton and the firm—he had lots of time to visit. At first she wanted him to talk in the 800s or the 600s—to stick fast to one subject like crazy glue—but she's learning. She's learning to like the way he drifts in his rudderless way from subject to subject, riding this wave of an idea and then another, so that she wonders, How could I ever find the right decimal place for him? And she's beginning to like that a lot. Sure, she gets seasick, but oh, the scenery! She's beginning to see that the mind—his mind, at least—doesn't really give a damn about categories.

But can a librarian survive when she starts to doubt the catalog, to question the very system that holds the universe together? When she begins to believe that the best thing for reading would be a 6.2 or 7.8 on the Richter scale, rattling the foundation of her many-storied house? Or is that what's bound to happen whenever the doors are thrown wide open? As the old standard goes, after they've seen Par-ee, the farm is just a haven for hayseeds. Leaving home, every man, woman and child must sooner or later negotiate that hairy hairpin turn, that monstrous question mark: Where am I going? And where they wind up, how they get to their next sentence, is anybody's guess.

And what about the accident—if that's what it was—swerving out of one lane—one category—and into the next, dodging all that flying fiction. Might have been a case of death by metaphor. Surely, she is lucky to be alive. But the Phantom disagrees. She is alive to be lucky, he says, alive just so she can crash into things. To crash, for instance, into that young rascal, Raskolnikov. For one can pursue something with such passion and such diligence that one day you realize you've passed it by. It's right back there, over your shoulder. And then, if you're lucky—zap!—like one of Zeus's thunderbolts from the blue, everything you've ever hoped for is scattered across your path. It's lying there—flat under your very nose. Yours for the taking. So maybe that was the beginning of the beginning. Or maybe what she saw was the end itself, so that eventually she could wind up like Dostoevsky, in the fast lane—an open book.

But hold on, they've arrived at page 472, the end of the epilogue. The Phantom is reading to her from an easy chair in Monica's third-floor apartment. Lying across the length of an overstuffed couch, Monica has been projecting her ideas onto her ceiling that is decorated with plaster appliqué, as if the designs had been squeezed out of one of those cake-decorating bags—curlicues and flowers, tendrils and leaves—a whole world up there, she thinks, a whole world upside-down. She sees what she knows. She is pretty sure now that what gets murdered in the end is not an old lady, a pawnbroker, but reality itself—an old way of seeing. The axe rises slowly and as it falls it slices through all those invisible connections—the threads that tie one loose idea to another. One thing ends, and then another. The heart skips a beat or two, clothes hang funny. Every expectation fades. Suddenly, anything is possible. Terror, we might call it—though it feels a lot like love. But what a relief, in a strange way, what a breath comes rushing in to fill the room, as if every door and window were of a sudden thrown wide open. Listening to page after page of Raskolnikov's guilt and confession has actually made her relax. And listen. And relax some more. Until now she loves the sound of Patton's voice: she anticipates it and hopes it will never stop. She loves how his voice murders the silence.

At this very moment, Patton is reading the last paragraph to Monica. And while his voice slows down, loosens its cadence and lowers its volume, she raises up, slowly, because she knows the end is coming. She has long ago planned to tip-toe over and kiss him as he sounds the last word of the last paragraph. She has watched that scene on the ceiling many times, she has seen that kiss lurking in the plaster plants—love in the cornice. That kiss will stand for a lot of things—for a thank you, for the idea of a kiss, for a delicate welcome to the long awaited arrival of love. She will kiss him for bringing her, on a long string of accidents, to this apartment, this couch, to this very moment.

As he approaches the end, she can hear the slightest edge of sadness take his voice. But she's intrigued, because what she hears also sounds like joy. And she's right. He knows what she's up to. And it makes him think how far he's come from Place and Bridge—those two letters, S and K. Now, he can only think they stand for Silence and a Kiss; and that makes him smile. Listen: "'But that is the beginning of a new story—the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration, of his slow progress from one world into another, of his initiation into a new unknown life. That might be the subject of a new story, but our present story is ended.'"

But our present story is ended. □



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# REFLECTIONS ON THE SACRED HEART

## A Story by Mary Soderstrom

Robert Nelson was copying a drawing of the valves of a heart when Charles Sauvé came into his surgery without knocking. It was an early evening, the summer of 1822, but still too light for candles. The sounds of Montreal floated through the open window: horses clopping slowly up Notre Dame Street, boys playing ball on the Champs de Mars, women's laughter somewhere. "I see," Robert said. "You so charmed the maid that she let you in even though my office hours are over."

"That's it," Charles said. "That's it exactly." He stuck his long legs out in front of him like an adolescent boy who has not learned to control his height. He smiled his famous smile, but as he put his elbows on the arms of the chair and folded his hands together, Robert noted how tense his muscles were.

"She is too easily influenced," Robert said, attempting a smile himself. "I shall have to speak to her about that." He looked carefully at his drawing, before placing it on top of the pile of studies of the heart he was doing to illustrate his treatise on physiology. Then he turned back to his friend "*Quel bon vent t'amène ici?*" He'd known Charles since they were boys, when Charles's father had consigned him to Robert's father's school to learn English and the conqueror's ways: they'd always slipped back and forth between French and English. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

A younger Charles at this point would turn the smile on Robert, and suggest an evening of billiards at the Silver Dollar Saloon. The invitations had been less frequent since Charles married two years before, but they still came.

Tonight, however, Charles didn't speak at first. He stood up and walked over to Robert's shelves of preserving jars filled with anatomical specimens. He picked one up and held it to the light before he answered: "I need to know what to do to avoid any more children."

For one terrible instant Robert wondered if Charles were taunting him. Then he put the thought away: not Charles. Nevertheless few people came to Robert for that sort of advice. Not only did Catholics regard birth as the only legitimate outcome of the marital relation, but most other Christians also believed children to be gifts from God. Robert's own adamantly anti-Papist parents had had nine.

There were methods, of course, and if Charles didn't know them, the fact underscored what Robert had



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always known: that Charles's man-of-the-world manner and his brilliant smile hid a soul simpler and more innocent than not.

"What does Catherine think about this?" Robert forced himself to ask.

"Catherine, Catherine," Charles said. He turned the specimen jar in his hand. "What does Catherine think?" he repeated, as if asking himself.

Catherine, Catherine. The words echoed in Robert's head. Catherine of the pale skin, the copper hair, the presence beyond joy.

Robert had met Catherine only after her brother Louis's accident, although Louis Fraser was one of the young bon vivants to whom Charles had introduced him.

The accident: Robert remembered standing for a second at the door to Louis's law office, while Louis's clerk tried to push him through the door. "There," the man said. "Do something. Do something quickly."

Louis on the floor of his office, fully dressed. Louis's blood flooding over his face and into his hair, red against bright copper. The straight razor on the floor, about thee inches from Louis's hand.

The blood itself was not alarming. Robert bled patients every day in the constant fight to maintain that equilibrium among the fluids in the body upon which health depended. He knew well the beautiful network of the circulatory system. He could draw it without a model. It appeared in his dreams.

No, what alarmed him was the way the blood pulsed from the rip in Louis's throat. A severed artery: in minutes Louis's heart would empty his body of blood.

"Put your fist here," Robert said to the clerk, pushing him to his knees and guiding his right hand to Louis's throat. "Push down hard. Not in, but down." He rummaged needle, flax thread and bandages from his bag. Then he rolled up his sleeves and knelt opposite the clerk.

The grand plan of the human differs somewhat from being to being. The carotid artery should be *there*, but might not be, particularly if it were sliced by a razor. One end might float in a pool of blood while the other spewed blood furiously. The trick would be to compress the end coming from the heart, tie it off if necessary, and then suture it with the other side.

"Don't move," Robert said to the clerk as he put his own left hand on Louis' throat directly under the clerk's. He pushed harder, rolling his fingers a bit, trying to feel the artery beneath the skin and muscle and against the esophagus and larynx. "All right," he said to the clerk. "Let up a little."

Then he held his breath as the man slowly drew his hand away. But no red gushed out. The clerk sighed deeply.

Robert pushed back the skin and muscle with his right hand so the artery was revealed. The cut looked no longer than the thickness of a coin. He dipped the needle quickly through the muscle sheath of the artery, leaving a long tail of thread outside the wound. Then he dipped back through again and again, not taking time to tie and cut off the stitches. He pulled the thread tight, grabbing the long tail so that he had both ends of the thread in his right hand. Then he carefully released the pressure of his left hand, watching for strain on the sutures. But they held. When his left hand was free he quickly made two conventional stitches. He waited a moment longer, checking. Then quickly he pushed muscle and skin back in place so that he could stitch up the outside.

He sat back on his heels before he looked at the clerk. "Fraser was lucky you were here to go for help."

The clerk stood up, looking around at the bloody mess on the Turkish carpet and the polished wood floor. "Lucky indeed, sir," he said. "He was shaving. He was standing right there with a bowl of soapy water, shaving himself in the mirror and there was a loud noise in the street which startled him, you know he always had a weak heart, and..."

Robert nodded and did not mention the absence of a bowl, or water or a mirror from the office. "Please tell the elder Mr. Fraser that I will send my bill to his office, and that I recommend that the younger Mr. Fraser pass the winter in a milder climate. His heart is in a sorry state if he startles so easily."

The clerk smiled. "Yes, of course," he said.

And that would have been that, but Catherine came a week later to offer her thanks for saving her brother. Robert had been with patients in the surgery when she arrived, and before he joined her in his sitting room he prepared what he would say: it was nothing, just luck and ordinary skill. But when he walked in, the afternoon sun was shining on her copper-colored hair. The reflected light seemed to fill the small room, and he found himself holding his breath as he walked across it, his hand extended, a smile on his face. A serviceable, professional smile that even then he knew was no match for Charles's.

A shock ran through him when she looked up at him with long-lashed brown eyes. For a second she looked dazed and then, as with a great effort, she sat up straighter. "Dr. Nelson," she said, "it is such a pleasure to meet you."

A formula greeting. Just as his words were too: "The pleasure is all mine, dear lady."

She stayed for tea. What else they said matters little, because afterwards it was the tone of voice, and the gesture that Robert remembered. That they had not met was an oddity in a small city like Montreal. What a shame, what a shame, he found himself thinking. All the time wasted when I might have watched that smile and heard that voice.



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But then it was time for her to go. She stood in front of him, arranging her shawl, listening to him. He found himself asking if he might call on her at her parent's home; he found the words difficult to pronounce, but he reached for her hand. She looked up at him, not surprised in the least, as he brought her hand to his lips.

Then she shivered once, violently, bringing her other hand up to cover her heart. "Oh, my dear Doctor, I am so sorry. But I have recently become engaged," she said.

Oh, yes, that was bad enough, but it became worse two minutes later, just as Robert had begun to wonder how an engagement could be broken. The maid announced Charles, come to pick Catherine up in the Fraser carriage.

"So you've met my Catherine," Charles said. "I told you I was going courting, and now you see how lucky I've been. Really, *mon vieux*, you ought to give it a try yourself."

Robert said nothing. You can control what you do, he began to learn at that moment. That was also his first step in learning the corollary: but you can not control the heart.

In the months which followed he had much time to reflect on the phenomenon. It must be related to Mesmerism, he decided. How else explain the fixation on one particular person? His science had room for an excess of a something that might govern amorousness: perhaps retention of the seminal fluid or blood which filled the body to overflowing. But that explained only a heightened propensity for attraction. It did nothing to say why that person there, that young woman with the brown eyes and red hair, the fortune and the fiancé. Catherine.

Charles wanted to be married soon, but old Fraser died of apoplexy at the beginning of the summer, so they had to wait a decent interval. Then Catherine became pregnant almost immediately after the wedding and Robert was one of the first they told. Charles also had a request: he wanted Robert to attend the birth. No matter that few women were followed by a physician at the time, his delight was marred by worry about the Frasers' sensitivity.

"You wouldn't know it to look at her," he said. They were sitting on the lawn at Beaver Lodge, the Frasers' house on the other side of Mont Royal. Robert had ridden out at Charles's invitation to spend a summer Sunday. "But there's always that shadow in her eyes, behind the sparkle. You can't be sure what she's thinking, it's as if she were aware of something that she's afraid to tell you. And I'm afraid that a confinement might be too much for her."

He did not mention Louis, who was still in Rome.

In his years of practice Robert had seen at least 250 babies born. A few had been doomed from the beginning: poor little things whose skin was blue or whose head was malformed or whose heart beat too fast or too slow. Two others he had had to remove from their mother's wombs in pieces after their death. One he had cut from his mother minutes after her own death. Such things happened. But he could no more admit the thought that something could happen to Catherine than he could admit how much he loved her.

He looked at Charles. "Catherine is not a weak woman," he said.

"Certainly not physically," Charles agreed. He paused, looking out on the lawn which stretched north east from the house. Since old Fraser's death, Charles spent most of his time managing the family's affairs. His look was the look of a patriarch in the making. "The fact that she is in a family way so soon argues for a strong constitution. But her mother shares my fears..."

He stopped talking as Catherine appeared at the edge of the kitchen garden, carrying a bouquet of wildflowers. A dog walked beside her. She still looked slim but she moved more slowly than Robert remembered. After a moment Charles continued: "She has confidence in you. So do I."

After that, how could Robert refuse without explaining? You can not control the heart, but you can control what you do. When he visited that summer, he was careful to avoid helping her into the carriage, not to offer his arm when the three of them went walking, not to listen too carefully to what she had to say. But he caught her looking at him at the dinner table three times during that time, and for three blinding moments he was transported.

The messenger from Beaver Lodge arrived on a Saturday night in early winter just as Robert was coming home from a supper, having drunk too much.

Charles had forseen that possibility; his message read: "Come at once even if it is Saturday. Difficulties have arisen. You at half capacity are worth any two other quacks."

The ride through the cold and windy night took the edge off Robert's drunkenness. But he was hardly prepared for what he saw. Catherine with her night dress drawn up to her shoulders, her eyes wild, her breasts ripe for the child who was struggling in her belly.

Mine, he said to himself. I want that. I must have that. But then he forced the habits of a professional forward. He administered a tincture of opium to calm her and strengthen her heartbeat. He prepared the forceps. He had the housekeeper keep track of the contractions. He delivered the head (covered with red curly hair already), and then deftly unwound the umbilical cord between contractions before he let the rest of the body slip out.

A boy. Charles's son. Christened Robert Fraser



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Sauvé a week later. Mother and child did well. Father was delighted.

The second son arrived 18 months later, an easier delivery at which the housekeeper acted as midwife without need for assistance.

And now Charles wanted to know how to avoid more children. "Of course there are ways to avoid conception, but are you sure you know what you are asking me?" Robert began. "The fruit of the marriage relation is..."

"I knew you'd say that," Charles said. He turned away from Robert's shelves of specimens, the preserving jar still in his hand. His face was red and his eyes were bright. "I knew you'd bring up all the pieties. But you don't know what it's like. You've never even had a mistress as far as I can tell. You're a bloody eunuch, is what you are."

The words were like cold water. Robert had to grip the edge of his desk not to answer back with the first things that came to mind. But he said: "We're not talking about me here, you're the one who wanted advice."

Charles looked down at the jar and then, in a completely uncharacteristic gesture, heaved it against the far wall. "I want advice," he said. "Yes, I want advice. I want a wife who will allow me near her."

I want a wife who will allow me near her: Robert felt a vise descend on his head and tighten.

Once again he forced himself to adopt the professional style, to reply as Charles seemed to expect him to. "There are ways and there are ways," he said finally. He swallowed and licked his lips. "There are ways which are more difficult than others..."

"Don't talk to me about abstinence. She's already talked to me about that. I've heard it all, she even had her mother talk to me." Charles turned around and shouted. "Anything besides abstinence would be a sin, of course. And nobody wants to make a sinner out of our lovely Catherine. But doesn't she have some duty toward me, isn't a wife supposed..."

Robert knew he had to escape. He stood up and walked across the room, his hands behind his back, his feet careful to avoid the mess on the floor. "I don't know the theology," he said, "you'd do best to ask a priest about that. But," he began.

But what? There were two other possibilities: withdrawal and the condom. He could counsel either one, explain how they are used, if Charles didn't really understand already. Or he could—and here the thought took his breath away—he could advise against both. Which would mean, he saw in a shimmer of half-realized images, that if Catherine were serious, she would turn her back to Charles. They would be very unhappy for a while, for a long while, perhaps. And then Charles, because he was the man he was, would eventually find something else: a mistress, a series of midnight visits to the back rooms of taverns, whatever. But Catherine, not certain of what impelled her, seeking something that she could not define, would not have the range he had. She would be at loose ends, with the tide of her blood rising within her. And Robert, not soon, not for three of four years perhaps, could present himself as the safe lover, the one who was not afraid of convention, but who would do anything to keep her body and her name inviolate. Yes, that could be one way the future would unfold.

But before he could finish his reflection Robert heard himself explaining in his best doctor's voice: "There are two ways. The first involves withdrawal from the female and the second..."

After Charles left, Robert looked for a long time at the drawing he'd been working on. The valves of the heart. Marvelous things, closing and opening in that life-long dance. He who understands the heart understands life. The heart's blood is the key to health of the body. The heart is perhaps the seat of the soul.

Robert picked up the drawing and walked around the room for several minutes, studying the beauty of the structure.Then he stopped. In front of him on the floor were the remains of the preserving jar Charles had thrown against the wall. The shards of glass, the alcohol, the specimen: the heart of some small animal.

You cannot control the heart, but you can try to control what you do. Robert crumpled his drawing in both his hands before he threw it and the small, pickled heart into the cold fireplace. Then he sat for a long, long time in the gathering darkness with his head in his hands and his tears, salty as blood, running down his face. □

BENJAMIN SIGMUND



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BRAD RICHARD

# His Kind

They don't want to play anymore. The muddied field
is cold now when they fall, the grass sharp, stinging,

the ball in someone else's arms. At the game's edge, closer
to the woods (where the sun falls away, forcing out

long shadows from the trees), he sits cross-legged
on his hands, watching the other boys collide, divide,

grapple and tackle, hears their small hoarse cries
before they're smothered by the sky, imagines

the mottled red of berries burst in ice-cream
in their cheeks and thighs, thinks of the heat

of a sudden slap, the shamed flush of tears. Tiredness
slows them as he watches, must be what allows a hand

to hang on a buddy's shoulder or sneak down to josh
the easy target of his ass; he guesses it's only the game

that keeps them here so late. He's not their friend, set apart
by rules that confuse the body he hates—so fat, so soft,

so pale his shame that he wishes himself into the woods
whose private terrors he treasures, the unnameable



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objects he pursues, alone, intent, pushing
past bramble and brush as if he almost sees

some toy he's lost, the Snow Queen's crystal,
a dwarf's ring, a changeling's cloak. Oh, he knows

his game is not for them, but if he could teach them
what rules, what makes him real, more real . . .

He smells winter coming. When this last warm day
is over, they'll go inside, eat, bathe, knead the ache

of muscles alien to him. He'll stay past dark,
until it's too cold for games, and he'll lose even this

near-belonging, this green and open playing field
whose outer bounds they concede to him, ignorant

of how, head bent, fingers braiding grass until it breaks,
he imagines those clean, damp bodies, limbs growing

in hidden warmth *never dreaming how I will grow*
*larger as darkness shrinks and chills the field*

*where we will gather at last as friends in secret*
*in harder games with only our bodies to rule.*



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JON SIGMUND

# Call My Name

## A Story by Aimee Bender

I'm spending the afternoon auditioning men. They don't know it. It's a secret audition, come as you are.

"No really," I say to the beanpole man on the Muni with eyes so tired you can see death lounging in them already, "do you prefer cats or dogs?"

He smiles at me in this tolerant way. I can't tell you exactly what I'm looking for, but I'll know it when it happens. I want to be breathless and weak, crumpled by the entrance of another person inside my soul. I want to be violated by insight.

"Cats, no question" he says, pill-rolling with his fingers. He's drugged out, but I don't care. What I care about is dogs, and I am disappointed.

I thank him, run a hand through my hair, and go back to sitting at my surveillance spot, front row, facing backwards, right behind the driver who winked at me when I came on.

I wear dresses on the subway. I have a lot of money from my dead father who invented the adhesive wall hook. He invented it when he was in his twenties and it hit the world like a tornado—no one cares for nails anymore. He died when I was three so I never really knew him enough to miss him and there are millions of dollars for me and my mom, and she isn't a spender. So it's just me! It's all me! I don't much like expensive cars or gourmet dinners; what I love are fancy dresses. Today I am wearing maroon satin, a floor- length dress with a V back and matching sandals with criss-cross straps up my ankles. My ears are lit by simple diamond earrings. I look like I should know how to waltz, and I do.

The men are pleased when I come on the subway because I am the type who usually drives her own car. I am not your average subway girl, wearing black pants and reading a novel the whole time so you can't even get eye contact. Me, I look at them and smile at them and they love it. I bet they talk about me at the dinner table— I give boring people something to discuss over corn.

The beanpole man stands up to exit and nods to me. I wiggle my fingers, bye. His death eyes crinkle up in a wise way and I almost want to chase after him, have him look down on me with that look and tell me something brilliant about myself, unveil my whole me with one shining sentence, but there's really no point. He couldn't do it. His eyes crinkle up because he's been in the sun too much— he doesn't even know my name.

I think I'm done, that I've checked out the whole car, when I see that behind the older woman in the dull beige suit who keeps trying to sleep, there is someone I didn't notice before. The shy man. He is leaning against the window, wanting a cigarette and not looking at me. I go sit down right next to him.

"If you smoke out the window," I tell him in a low voice, "no one will notice."

"What?" He's about ten years older than I am, and his eyes are bright, watery even.



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"I won't tell if you smoke."

He gets it and blinks. "Thanks," he says, but he doesn't move.

My dress is slithering all over the orange plastic seat, sounding like a holiday.

"So, what's your name?" I ask.

He has his head looking out the window, watching the dark cement flash by. The back of his hair is matted down, like he's just woken up from a nap.

"Or where are you going?" I say louder.

He turns to me, eyebrows up.

I lean in a little. My hair falls forward and I can smell my shampoo which smells like almonds. "I'm just curious," I say, "what stop?"

"Powell," he says. "Your hair smells like almonds."

I'm so pleased he noticed.

"Do you prefer dogs or cats?" I ask him, even though I don't really, at this exact second, need to know.

"You ask a lot of questions," he says.

"Yes."

"Well."

"What?" My dress isn't holding to the seat, I could slide right down to the floor.

"I prefer," he says, "whichever turns around when you call its name."

He may be shy but he looks me in the eye the whole time.

The train strains to a stop and he stands up to slide past me. But I'm up with him. The bottom of my dress is dusty from the floor of the subway and I'm thinking it looks sort of vintage that way. He presses on the handle and he's out the door really fast, and I just barely have a moment to look at the car I've been surveying and watch the people watch me exit. A man with a briefcase smiles back but the women all ignore me.

I float behind the shy man for a few blocks; he's up the escalator and onto Market Street and doesn't notice my burgundy shadow behind him until he ducks into a retail shoe store and then I'm hard to miss. The salesgirls are on me in one second, I have Purchase written all over me. So they think. This is a lame shoe store.

"Hey," says the man, "you following me?"

"May-be." I saunter over to a pair of shoes and pick them up even though they're so ugly and poorly made.

"Those are one of our best sellers," says salesgirl number one who has lipstick on her front tooth.

"That is not a good selling point for me," I tell her, "and you have lipstick on your tooth."

Her head ducks down and she rubs her forefinger on it. "Thanks," she says in a quiet whisper, like it's a secret, "I hate that."

The man has left the store—one second of conversation with a stupid salesgirl on my stupid part, and he's gone. The store owner is behind the counter watching me glance around at the racks of shoes and he tilts his head, indicating the staircase behind him.

"You his girlfriend?" he says.

"Maybe," I say again. Really: if the shy man didn't care at all, if he hadn't looked at me with a certain sly hunger, then I wouldn't be here. But he was half there with me, I saw him thinking about the heavy sound the satin would make piled on his floor, I saw him wondering. He may have wondered very quietly, but it still counts.

I thank the store manager by placing one solid hand on his shoulder and squeezing it. Maybe someday I'll come in here and buy fourteen pairs of shoes from him. Not like I'd wear them, but I could go give them to homeless people who must like a change every now and then. I'll buy practical shoes, cushioned soles, no heels or anything. You probably walk a lot when you're homeless so heels would not be a good choice.

The staircase is fairly dark but you can still sense the glare of the daylight outside so it doesn't feel scary, just cool and slightly musty. Luckily, there's only one apartment at the top of the staircase. I try the door and it's open. For me, it's more nerve-wracking to knock than to just go on in. He's sitting in his living room with a beer and no shirt, watching TV. He looks at me, sort of amused, not really surprised.

"Persistent dress lady," he says, "you are one persistent cookie."

I love being called cookie. I love it. I love it.

I go to sit next to him on the couch.

"Do you know how to waltz?" I ask.

He flips a few channels and then turns off the TV. "So what's the deal?" he says, "are you a prostitute?"

The thing is, I'm not offended. It makes me feel like he's getting the sexual vibe which makes me feel good, you know, alive.

"No," I say. "I just like you. Do you have plans tonight? It's Friday night, maybe we can do something."

"I have plans tonight," he says. He looks at his watch. "It's two o'clock. In six hours."

His chest is tan and a little bit doughy, soft nipples that look like a woman's. For some reason it's hard for me to even look at those nipples. They look so fragile, like fruit pulp, like fruit pulp waiting to be cut into wedges and served up in an exotic kiwi salad. It makes me want to crawl on top of him and put my thumbs on his soft fruity nipples and press down on them hard like they're elevator buttons: hey, baby, take me to a higher floor. I wonder if he's feeling lucky, I mean how often does a beautiful girl follow you home and come into your house? That's lucky. That's what guys wish for.

"So." He leans back on his couch and grabs a cigarette from the side table. I knew it. "I suppose I'd like to cut that dress right off of you."

"Really?"

"Yup." He takes a long drag off his cigarette and



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then stubs it out. Maybe I should be scared, but I'm not. There's the sound of all the cars and buses going by on Market Street, and it reassures me.

"Knife or scissors?"

He smiles. "Knife," he says.

"I don't know," I say, "that's a little much, I think, for me."

"Scissors." He relights the butt in the ashtray and smokes it again.

"Okay. Scissors."

"You can let go of that incredible dress as easy as that?" he asks.

"I can." I have a bank account the size of your apartment, I'm thinking. I can see, on his bathroom door, an adhesive hook holding up a black t-shirt.

He goes to his bedroom and comes out with a pair of orange-handled scissors. He walks slowly even though he knows I'm watching him. Back on the couch, he doesn't sit any closer to me but just takes the hem and slices up, up past my hip, waist, side of my breast, under my arm, down the sleeve, up around, to the shoulder, snip at the neck. I feel like he took a letter opener and gently opened me up; he did such a neat job of it. Leaning back on his side of the couch, he replaces the scissors and surveys his work. I smile at him. The next move should be his.

"I don't think I'm going to touch you," he says.

I'm there, waiting, body cooled by the breeze coming in off the street through the window behind us.

"What?" I know he can see my breast; it's right there; I can sense it out of the bottom of my eye.

"Nope." He stands up and looks around.

"What, are you going to tie me up or something?" I slide out my other arm so that my upper body is exposed, just my legs and waist still swathed in maroon satin. His couch is kelly green and it's an interesting contrast. I spend a minute looking at it.

"Tie you up?" He goes to the refrigerator and pours himself a glass of water. "No. I don't do that shit." He doesn't seem to even notice that I'm half out of the dress.

"Hello," I say, "what is going on here? You just opened up my dress."

"Yeah," he says, "thanks."

"But we have six hours," I tell him, "you said we have six hours."

"Well," he says, sipping the water, the counter between us, "what would you like to do?"

I'm up off the couch which means the dress is on the floor and I'm naked in high heels. Which is maybe how I've wanted to be all day, those straps criss-crossing up my ankles like painted snakes. I take the water out of his hand and hop up on the kitchen counter and pull him to me with my feet. Then I kiss him, smoke taste still on his lips which are cold from the water. He keeps his mouth closed and I press my body to his. "Six hours," I say, "is a long time."

"Lady," he says, "I don't think it's going to happen here. I wanted to cut your dress. I don't really want to fuck you, that's just not what I'm looking for today. Sorry if that was misleading."

He has his water back in his hand. I take it from him and have a sip. It's just water.

"Yeah, well," I tell him, "it was. I do think cutting up someone's dress is misleading."

Stepping back, he exits my feet without difficulty, and looks straight at me, into me, like he did in the subway, the way that I love. He leans against the refrigerator and a magnet drops to the floor.

"You want to be tied up?" he says then, "I'll tie you up."

If I need to scream, out of the millions of people on Market Street, one of them will hear me. Someone would hear me and do something. I can scream really, really loud.

He leads me to his bedroom which is very plain, nothing on the walls, an unmade bed. He has one chair at a desk and he puts me in it and goes to his closet and removes two belts. He starts to weave one of the belts through the slats at the back of the chair and around my hands.

"Bedroom or living room?" he asks, his voice sort of flat.

"Living room, please," I say.

Lifting me up in the chair, he brings me into the other room. My arms are already bound so he begins on my legs with swift, efficient hands. The window is still open, and I'm thinking about where I should aim my scream just in case.

It seems like he can't tie both legs effectively without another belt so he reaches down and whips the one out of his jeans, which then sink a little lower on his hips. I can see the broken angle of his pelvis. His nipples are still soft. I lean down, feeling like a deer in a trap, and dare to kiss one of them, bite it a little, those sweet soft fearful nipples.

"Hey," he says, "I'm doing something here."

I lean forward to try to kiss him again but he has stepped back, and I can't move. He circles the chair and tests the belts. I arch my back. My breasts are poking out like cones, *my* nipples are not soft. He goes to the couch and turns on the TV.

"You go imagine what you want," he says, "tell me when you want to be untied."

I jump the chair around some so that I can see him.

"What do you mean?" I say. He sticks his feet up on the coffee table, and starts to gently fold my dress.

"Just what I said."

"You tie me up just to tie me up?"

He puts the dress in a neat pile next to him, and runs a hand through his hair again. Why does everyone but me look so fucking tired? I get too much sleep. He



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takes a deep breath. "For right now," he says steadily, "I'm going to watch TV."

I watch with him for a minute; it's a show about Mozart. But I can't really concentrate because behind the TV is the bathroom door with the hook and I can't stop looking at that. My father was a millionaire, I want to tell him. You can't just tie up a millionaire's daughter and not fuck her. You can't just tie her up while she's naked with maroon sandals strapping her ankles and a taut stomach from ten million sit-ups and watch television! Who do you think you are?

I want to jump the chair over and pounce on him, but I can't steer it very well, so instead I turn my head around and stare at him, first seductively and then like a pain in the ass.

He looks up after a while. "Yes?"

"I'm bored," I say.

"You want to go home now?"

"But we have six hours." It comes out sounding whiny. I wait for him to react, but he doesn't tell me to shut up and then unbuckle his pants with one quick rip. His face is kind, still tired, cheeks slack. I want to lay his head on my chest and soothe him, poor man who lives alone in this shitty apartment. Poor man. Let me love you here on your green couch for the street to see, let me offer you something magical in the space between my breasts. Please. Please. Let me.

"Lady," he says again, "you ready to go home?"

I'm thinking about the walk home. I'll have to go into one of the stores and buy myself another dress. I'll borrow one of his T-shirts, or if he doesn't let me, then I'll wrap the satin around me like a towel. The salesgirl will note the strange outfit but acknowledge the fineness of the material, and decide I'm a good bet. She'll tell me her name and hang up my choices while I still browse around. Maybe I'll tell her the story of this dress, but leave it open-ended. And she'll giggle, for after all, I am the customer. I'll take a cab home in a new glorious brocade cream-colored gown. My apartment is big and I have a big TV. I have a velvet couch and it's one of a kind. I have cable. I have better reception than this stupid nipple man. I have a remote control that can work through walls.

I look at him again; he's lighting up another match to continue smoking that same first cigarette.

"No," I tell him, slumping back down in the chair. "I don't want to go home yet." He turns to look at me. "Is that okay?" I ask.

He gives a little nod. "That's fine," he says, leaning forward to change the channel. "So. Game show or the news?"

"Not the news, please," I say. He clicks the knob three times over. The game show host looks really old. The shy man puts his elbows on his knees and he starts to call out answers to the trivia questions. I close my eyes and listen to the noise of winning fill the room. □

WILLIAM HATHAWAY

## Spring Forward

This time of year old questions
come again: which crows are ravens
and, putting our ears to the trees,
which inflection—on the *fee*
or the *bee*—signals chickadee
from phoebe? Such considerations
spring afresh each year to last out
the season. I myself walk about
with autumn now forever within.
No matter how bright it shines
on white crust, moonlight bears
in its gleam the sword's cold gray
and the snowwhite owl glows high
in drooping boughs like the pine's
private moon. O you'd like to see
what I've seen but no one would be
out in the cold, so long alone
with what pale light to look upon
giving up only degrees of dark.
Ravens are bigger-beaked. Don't strain
to tell *wonk-wonk* from *caw-caw*—
blackness clashing against light
crushes all calls into any song
your ear would hear. Instead, wait
to see the raven glide into twirls
against the blue of heaven;
listen for the throaty trills
that only the drab phoebe warbles
low along the stream bracken.
There are your answers; what light
I've palmed from the steely glisten
I gladly give up to you. Turn down
the television and like an old woman
by a hearth of long-ago tell them
to the children as your own.
If my doom is not in this day,
it awaits in another. Gray
and cold is the sea, certain
is the pitch of black ahead
where a glimmering blade
of moonpath points to the dead.
Whatever doom awaits, it is doom
and he who walks alone
must lock sorrow in his heart
and call that darkness home.



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RANDY F. NELSON

# Abduction

HERE'S A FLASH. If I phone them, it's a story. If they phone me, it's therapy. No exceptions. And that's the tabloid truth. So usually I ask, you got pictures? You got some way I can verify this crap? And about half of them hang up. The other half are inventive. It's why I throw away my life in Best Western parking lots—waiting for Elvis or some woman with a two-headed baby. Because you never know.

So this kid's cracking the door just enough to show a flannel granny gown. Pink damn flowers from neck to ankle, one hand on the knob and one on the chain like some old lady who's got second thoughts about reporting the Satan worshippers across the street. And I'm thinking okay, okay, at least you believe, while I flash her some i.d. and start crooning. "Hi. I'm Barry Nussbaum. From the *Global-Star*?"

And nothing.

She's got herself wedged behind the door trying to decide whether to slam or trust some old guy with a pony tail and loose tie. Like maybe I've come to take her back to the mother ship. Who knows what she's seeing? So I back off, smile, try to see what it is I'm seeing; and it's not a story. She looks about fifteen. Big honey-blonde hair that hasn't seen a brush in two days, blue eyes that are way past bloodshot, and not quite enough make-up to ruin a perfect complexion. Probably a runaway. And I'm thinking, Jesus, she looks like a cheerleader that somebody beat the shit out of. Except that's not news and I'm already into my routine. "Janelle? Are you the Janelle Roberts who called? Because, honey, if you've got a story, I can't get it out here in the corridor. Now, do you want to talk to the cops or do you want to talk to me?" Pure bluff; but it gets the door open, doesn't it?

"I can't stop crying," she says.

Okay. I'm inside, and it's real now. The stale air. Food cartons on the floor, trash talk on the tube. And I feel this tightness in my chest, this familiar, sad fatigue that's going to drag me into some trailer park and kill me someday. I can tell she's freaked out. Got the furniture arranged around her bed like a barricade, Pooh Bear against the headboard, rose petals all over the nightstand like the flower girl went crazy at your cousin's wedding. Draperies closed. And I can feel the flu coming on, everything going numb including my emotions, and I have to concentrate just to taste the cigarette smoke—exhale, watch it drift. And here we are. She's looking at me; I'm looking at her pink toenails. Like we're the most normal couple in the world.

"You mentioned a boyfriend over the phone—?"

I'm just treading water. I saw there was nothing for the front page in the first ten seconds, and I've already reduced her to a six-inch story in the back—if I can find the angle. We avoid each other's faces and stare instead into this pile of crumpled sheets in the corner.

Finally she says, "He's gone. I think he took the car." Easing her feet under this green blanket that looks like pond scum, then drawing her knees up the way they do when they're little girls.

So I just come right out with it, my one foray into cleverness. "Is he the one who hit you?"

But she shakes her head, puzzled. So I fish out the tape recorder and figure I'll give her ten more minutes because, underneath, she's beautiful and I feel like she's somebody I knew and lost a long time ago. I ask her if she's called anyone else.

"No," she says. "I just need the money."

And I think, God, you could be an actress. You could be Lolita. You could be my own kid, somebody I loved if the world weren't such a garbage heap, but I say, "Okay. Here's the deal. You get a thousand dollars straight up if I can verify. Five thousand if I get photographs. But you've got to convince me. We don't pay for scams and we don't do counseling. So, Janelle. Have we got an abduction story or not?"

"Last night," she nodded.

"Good. Good. Now—amaze me."

"There was this rumbling noise, like a train. And then this bright light. You know, like . . . a train."

"Okay, forget the recorder. Just talk to me."

"I couldn't move. It was like I was floating, up, but I couldn't move, and then I was just there."

"Where? In a room? A spacecraft?"

"I don't know."

"Okay, don't worry about that. We can do a sketch later. Now, after you were lifted up, is that when you saw the alien?"

"Yes, I mean no. I didn't have any clothes on and I couldn't move. I don't remember exactly. It was so cold and they made me lay back."

"That's when they examined you?"

"Yes."

Now I want to pick her up and shake her, shake the damn flowers off her gown and say, You think I haven't heard this before? You think I'm paying for this? Sweetie, I can get your whole life into three paragraphs.

But I hear her whispering to me, "Mr. Nussbaum, I'm afraid I'm going insane."

"Let's open the drapes, it's still light outside."

"No!"

"Okay, but tell me what really happened."

Tears now. She's winding the bedspread around her legs and shivering. Backing away.

"Janelle, listen to me. I've done a hundred of these



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stories. I can smell a phoney before it gets cooking. Now if you need some kind of help—."

"There was an alien."

"Okay. There was an alien. What did he look like?"

"He was so small."

"Okay, small. What else?"

"A large head, very large. And those eyes just like the pictures. Round but, you know, pointed at the end. These deep dark eyes. And tiny little hands, Mr. Nussbaum. I'm not imagining this."

"What else?"

"Just this little gash, this purple gash for a mouth. And no hair. No hair on its body. Please. Please, help me."

I flick off the recorder. "Look, whoever you are, I'm really sorry. I know you're confused and that somebody's hurt you—okay? I'll call Social Services when I get back to the office. Here's a twenty; it's all I've got."

"It was gray!" Defiance? I can't tell and it doesn't make any difference—what does anybody named Janelle Roberts have to defy? "Sort of pinkish-gray. A little bit . . . bluish-gray I think. I couldn't . . . watch."

"Just one?"

"Yes."

"Well, maybe you were dreaming." It's the kindest thing I can think to say.

"You weren't there. When it cried."

"What?"

"When it made this crying sound. When it came out."

"Out?"

"After it came out of me."

It takes a moment for me to realize.

"It made this tiny sound. And the eyes made real tears, so I knew it was from somewhere, but I just couldn't. So I took the pillow. To make it stop."

"Jesus Christ."

"And wrapped it in the sheets. Over there in the corner. You know, for the pictures."

But when I finally reach out, she settles into my arms. □

ELIZABETH WRIGHT

# Ordinary Karma

My father often came to the table without a shirt, wearing only a pale blue pajama bottom, the single snap stretching below his Irish stomach. My mother would pat his stomach and say "Due any day?" I was an only child.

He threw bread. He would lean back in his chair, wink at me, and then toss a single roll to my mother, a wide loopy arc that sometimes hit the black chain Spanish-style light fixture that hung above the kitchen table and caused it to shake. He tossed the bread high to give her time to react, and she was cool, never dropping her fork or spitting her food, and she would snag it in mid-air and say "Thanks." Then my father would stick his short stubby fingers in the butter and hold them out to my mother and say "Butre, madame?" like he imagined they would say it in France, although none of us had been to France yet. My mother would say "oui" and he would smear the butter on her roll.

They were not very much alike. My mother was raised in the South—genteel, well educated, a player of pianos, a braider of braids. She saw Kennedy and Johnson when they came through Charlotte in the sixites, and later Hubert Humphrey, who was her favorite. My father was from Ohio. He joined the Navy when he was sixteen and went around the world three times. When they were out at sea for many months, the Navy happened to give an I.Q. test to everyone on board and the next day, as he was literally swabbing the deck, my dad's C.O. came up to him and said "Son, did you know you're almost a genius?"

My dad spent the next two years in northern Africa working on a radar installation. He was very good with radar. Once, while tracking an aircraft carrier, he touched the screen with a metal pen and force of the shock knocked him off his metal chair and back across the room where he hit the wall like a cartoon character. When he came to, his greatest fear was that he was no longer smart, that it had been some sort of dream or movie, a brief African vacation in the middle of an Ohio life. He made them give him another I.Q. test and he had gone up three points. While in the radar program he was stationed with my mother's genteel and well-educated brother and Dad came home with Uncle Harry on leave and that is how he met my mother. My father voted Republican and he was rough and wild and self-made and obsessed with money. He used to sing a song that went "She wears silk underwear, I wear my only pair."

My parents ran through my life like two parallel lines, the way Independence Boulevard and Providence Road run through Charlotte. But when I was young my friends all wanted to come to dinner because word was out in the neighborhood that both of Kim's parents were crazy and this made me very proud. They would act normal at first, asking my friends about their families, pouring them Coke or Pepsi, but then at some point, my father would throw the bread and my mother would catch it, never breaking her sentence, so fast and smooth that for a moment you were never sure that it had actually happened, or that you had imagined that arc between them.

It never surprised me that my father threw the bread, but it surprised me every time that my mother caught it. It was my job to laugh. My parents are dead now, but if there was one thing I could ask them, I would ask if they ever threw the bread when I wasn't there. □



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ROBERT ERWIN

# Scrawny Chic

I AM GOING DOWN an escalator in a hotel, from the lobby to the street. Toward me on the up side rises an emaciated woman. As we approach each other I begin to see her in detail, and the experience is awful.

Forehead taut as though gripped by a medieval torture instrument. Cavities where her cheeks ought to be. A chin like the blade of a hatchet. Stringy neck and bony arms. Wafer breasts. Not enough belly to digest lunch. Not enough lap to hold a cat. Legs like the shafts of golf clubs. Feet—or at any rate shoes—you could slide through a mail slot.

While there is still distance between us, I try to overcome my prejudice. Maybe she is ill. Maybe she survived a car crash. Maybe she is genetically challenged. It's not kind and not cool to gape at someone's physical oddities. Skinniness in no way precludes this woman from being brave, reverent, smart, loyal, etc.

When we come closer, though, my good intentions waver. From her fresh skin and shiny hair and the absence of character in her face, I would guess she is about twenty-four years old. She looks less careworn than the people riding up behind her, who themselves look fairly pampered. Her clothes are stylish. No obvious injury or medical condition makes her stand as she does on the escalator step: like an armature. Her knees are pathetic, but her ears seem normal. I think she has done a lot of this to herself.

She's a well-known type. Clothes and grooming products are modeled by her kind. Skinny women pose at resorts and among "furnishings." As frail trophies they sometimes confer authority on male figures in the ads.

To be fair, I should say that wan male models are increasingly deployed too. Plenty of them appear at the big January fashion show in Milan. Just the other day in an ad for "designer khakis" I saw a young fellow with a discouraging little chest. An aura of biochemical as well as moral failure surrounded him. Hammacher Schlemmer and other retailers report brisk demand for men's "slenderizing" underwear —essentially girdles. *The New York Times* quoted an amused store employee: "A lot of guys say, 'Oh, I just need it for my reunion,' and then they get six of them." At least the skinny women sometimes look complicated. Their male counterparts appear vacant, their deepest thought focused on that sliver of apple caught in their back teeth.

Beyond paid models, to signal that rich women live in a state of grace photographers generally contrive to make those subjects look skinny as well. Though film and television directors require a number of weightier characters to represent the actual world, entertainers are of course not safe from malnutrition either. You could play the ribs of some singers and actresses like a toy xylophone.

AS WE PULL EVEN on the escalator the woman disregards me lightly, without either the catatonic look or the fear-grin many women wear to repel male stares. I respect that, and it gets my conscience started again. Probably she is an emulator rather than a perpetrator—therefore in a sense a victim. None of us can glance through a magazine or watch television without having skinniness thrust at us. She might think she will automatically flip the page, tune out. Yet the instant she drops her guard, sucked-in cheeks or a deprived thigh will provoke her anxiety. Top commercial artists have done their utmost to make this form of freakishness alluring. If middle-class and some lower-class people can afford meals every day, elaborately staged emaciation translates as exclusiveness, and she is compelled to purchase a fragment of it. This amounts to conspicuous consumption with backspin. God forbid, however, that she should regard consumption as a joyless obligation. The artists strive to provide what the German sociologist Georg Simmel called "sterile excitement," the hallmark of modern media. If the woman has succumbed to the bombardment of images, who can blame her?

Even if she is in the business, I should be cautious about criticizing her. Successful models are enterprising and persistent, and the same goes double for designers and fashion promoters. Models meet interesting people and go to interesting places, and those at the top earn up to $400,000 per year. They work hard at tedious assignments and frequently manage rewarding second careers after collagen breakdown. To the extent that skinniness is a cause of covert discrimination in other fields, they hold open opportunities for women who would otherwise go through life using clothes as a cover-up rather than a vehicle of expression. Even if the woman I saw is not in the business, is a pure dupe, she may deserve credit for converting someone else's commercial trickery into a personal ideal, misguided as hell but nevertheless transvalued.

Partly out of sympathy for how images may have warped her, I don't look back after she and I pass. Squeamishness figures in there, too. I dread the lack of hams I might witness. Most of all, however, I am absorbed in thinking about why scrawny chic is inflicted on us and why it is accepted. So absorbed, I stumble at the bottom of the escalator. I do a Jerry Lewis spasm to hide my embarrassment and keep worrying the question.



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WHY SKINNY MODELS? *To maximize sales* springs to mind as a likely answer. Holding to that view, however, implies that the marketeers are short on information and reasoning power. Other things being equal, if the average model gained twelve pounds, no one in the world would buy fewer clothes than before. More clothes in fact might be sold. According to a recent survey by Grey Advertising, 70 percent of the women who read glamor magazines believe the ads insult their intelligence. Since only about 2 percent of the female population comes by ultra-skinniness naturally, they probably feel insulted in their persons as well. Ultimately clothes and cosmetics aren't sold by models anyway. Planned change—tank tops this year and puff sleeves next year—drives demand. Fashion, whatever the details of the moment, keeps vanity, snobbery, insecurity, and a craving for illusion and distraction in play. Models are just one vehicle for peddling fashion, alongside window displays, journalistic hype, mannequins, etc. Their particular role is to be alive. Through them sellers demonstrate command over human beings, tell them what to wear and how to stand—a commercial version of liveried servants. Furthermore, even if human beanpoles are a workable way to induce sales, they are not necessarily the best one. There are a thousand ways to create sterile excitement. Auto manufacturers, liquor distillers, recording companies, and makers of athletic shoes come up with variants time and again, pulling dollars into their sector.

To assume that fashion advertisers lack information and cleverness is in turn as implausible as the idea that skinniness maximizes sales. And again the implications are confusing. Seldom a week goes by without another book, article, or talk-show session on eating disorders. The 83-pounder who psychotically perceives herself as a mass of blubber is an emblem of our times. So-called fitness clubs say the primary goal of their women customers is weight control, not health. A study cited in *Harper's* reports that 90 percent of white teenage girls "are dissatisfied with their bodies." Recently the *New York Times* covered the case of a young woman brought to St. Vincent's Hospital when she was found unconscious on the floor of her apartment. Coming to after hospital staff inserted an intravenous feeding tube, "the severely anorexic woman looked up...and exclaimed 'Dextrose— that's sugar!' and with her last bit of energy she ripped out the IV needle." According to a nurse, "We had to tie her down to get some nutrients in her, but...she died of kidney failure as a result of her self-induced starvation." Given such evidence, surely models, their employers, and the media that run the ads must know the harm they do.

In which case the picture gets murky indeed. The perpetrators might be moral zombies—a mystery in its own right. Conceivably out of subconscious hostility, someone delights in demeaning women: symbolic mutilation. Perhaps someone intuits that masochists make the best customers.

BY THIS TIME I'm out on the street. The air is fresh. I try to stop this nutty speculation. I fail.

Honestly, I think, Oz is easier to understand than the woman on the escalator. A tin man with an upside-down funnel for a skull lives in Oz, created by a blacksmith with magical powers. Scraps the Patchwork Girl lives there too, made of quilting. It occurs to me that the woman I passed was somehow brought to life by a lawyer. She had hips within the technical meaning of the term, but they seemed as unsubstantial as a dummy corporation set up to conceal ownership. Could be it was a wizardly soap manufacturer who breathed life into her? Her meager body looked fanatically scrubbed. Too many showers as well as too few corpuscles.

I'm at the corner now, waiting for the light to change. I'm back from Oz. I'm coping. Calmly I revert to my simple question. Why is scrawny chic?

At last an answer that feels right crosses my mind. Millions hate and resist carnality. In response to the human condition, traditional sages and saints counseled rising to a higher spiritual plane, fusing with the divine will. Tormented by a similar longing, post-moderns try to duck beneath carnality instead of transcend it. They venerate images and objects. They would like to be as pure and clean as an item sold by Crate & Barrel, whose catalogue says "This glass and steel table has inimitable warmth." They would like to be vivid but disembodied like figures on film. They fear and loathe real membranes and blood, organs and tissue, pores and sinew. Our truly devoted ones reject carnality with suicidal vehemence.

This was already evident in one of the earliest studies of anorexia, the case of Ellen West, analyzed by the psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger over fifty years ago. "And every day I get a little fatter, older, and uglier." Ellen West wrote those words to a boyfriend when she was twenty-one years old, thought of by others as a bustling and ambitious young woman. Over the next dozen years, as her weight rose and fell, fell and rose, depending on her mood, there were times when she subsisted mainly on psychotherapy and laxative pills, as many as seventy a day. At the age of thirty-three, weighing just over a hundred pounds, she committed suicide.

The light changes. Traffic parts like the sea. I cross with the others. I am inspired, as though a great carrot stick were glowing in the sky. □



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ANDY COUTURIER

# Fry It How You Like It

IN A TINY CHROME and Formica restaurant on the sixth floor of the Tokushima "City" department store, Kenji and I are wrestling with the language barrier. We are stirring cabbage, onions, eggs, prawns and Worcestershire sauce on the small cast-iron griddle between us. Piles of clean, finely chopped ingredients are obsequiously placed on our table by a uniformed and cheerful waitress.

I look around me and try to experience the *okonomi-yaki* restaurant feeling. Each mini-environment here in Japan compels a certain mood, which, being Japanese, you invite. Nestled in this booth with my ex-DJ friend, I exert myself to take in all the carefully constructed details that spell the experience: *okonomi-yaki.*

Roughly translated, okonomi-yaki means, "Fry it how you like it." In the translation, the words "you" and "it" have been inserted to make sense in English. In Japanese, the focus is on the actions: "liking," "frying." Subjects or pronouns are rarely deemed necessary.

The shiny decor, colorful plastic paneling, bouncy Japanese teeny-pop music, and the employees' spiffy pink and white uniforms—all synchronize to intone "okonomi-yaki" into the back of our consciousness. The mood is all ready and waiting, and "you" become the interchangeable part. Personality is irrelevant.

Kenji is telling me that since the disco closed, he has been working in a factory that makes *"butsudan"*—wait a second, Kenji, please, I have to look that up in my dictionary—I read: "Buddha shelves."

I look up, puzzled. Then I get it: those carved teak and mahogany cabinet/altars in older people's homes. I usually see them filled with fruit, sticky rice cakes, embroidered cloth, sake, ancestor's names painted on small wooden shingles, and, of course, a little statue of the Buddha.

I frown. I have never liked butsudan. For one thing, they are made from tropical hardwoods which the Japanese economy is literally devouring.

Also my understanding of the Buddha's teachings is far away from the chanting of sutras to assorted inanimate objects. The empty, soft and alert mind of my meditation practice feels very foreign to their beseeching images for favors.

As usual, I don't have the vocabulary to express my thoughts. What a trial not to voice all my opinions! I have to leave it alone, to let it be. So I take my cue from what the culture expects: I feign interest.

"Butsudan? Ah, so, interesting ..."

I pick up the shiny steel spatula. Its lines are clean, its heft and balance in my palm are flawless. Looking out the window I watch the buses coming and going in the open-air station below us.

AS I STIR THE YELLOW-ORANGE MIX, I remind myself that I'm trying to make conversation here, not evaluate my friend. I rein in my judgmentalism. This is not a land where one is defined by, or is accountable to justify, one's work. You work because you work. The very word "choice" was imported from English: *Choice-suru,* "to do choice." It seems that the Japanese language didn't have a concept that encompassed the utterly optional connotation from the Land of the Free. Or perhaps the traditional word for "choice," (literally "select,") didn't excite their imagination in the same way that the sparkling new import "choice" does.

In Japanese, words are pictographs, not phonetic combinations, and are thought of as icons, representations of fundamental and subliminal human experience. Half through imagination, half through observation, I have developed a theory about the Japanese importation of English words: each one becomes a pointer to invoke some part of the talismanic power of "America" and the wide-open freedom of James Dean and the endless road trip.

Kenji is pretty forthcoming, not afraid of telling me details. I also notice a lack of the familiar "nice behavior with the foreigner." He's just being himself. I relax. Conversations here have definitely been worse.

Apparently he is just back from Korea. I perk up. Korea? In all my time here, I've never met anybody who actually *wanted* to go to Korea. (That's why I'm making all this money teaching "American" English.)

With comparatively little prodding, Kenji volunteers that he went over as a company rep. His boss wanted to know what happened to all the money. I piece together from comprehended fragments and guesses that part of these Buddha shelves have been sub-contracted out to a certain Korean gentlemen and his ostensible firm in Kwonju.

Kenji's face becomes animated with that rare emotion among Japanese: anger. He dips his basting paintbrush into the little beaker of syrupy brown sauce and bastes his yaki. "Keep sending money !" he says. "Korean keep asking money ... never finish (something or other)." Then some reference to the Korean being fat, perhaps.

The result of his excursion (I think) is that all the money is gone and the business relationship is over. He concludes with the statement, "Regarding Korean, dislike."

The word for "dislike" and the word for "hate" are the same in Japanese. One is, I suppose, to discern the difference by tone of voice or contextual clues. Or is this



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putative difference just a conceptualization of ours, based on categories unique to the English language? We become so used to the connotations of certain thought boxes that we tend to confuse them for reality.

And, as usual in Japanese, there is no subject in this sentence. Kenji hates? His boss hates? His company hates?

But most confusing for my precision-addicted mind is whether his hate is for this Korean or for all Koreans. Japanese is a language which does not require a clear distinction between singular and plural. (Just imagine, for a moment, my many fruitless hours trying to explain to my English students why one would need such a distinction. They certainly have survived without it for all this time.) There are a few marker words that one can insert to clarify if it seems necessary, but in this case, apparently, it didn't. And, as every individual is but a representative of their group, whether that be family, company or nation, does the distinction really matter?

But to my consciousness, raised in the church of Good and Evil, Right and Wrong, identifying this distinction between individual hate and collective hate seems crucial. Is this racism or personal grudge? My mind aches to know what exactly this person is saying. The school of Hollywood cinema taught me to determine who is the good guy and who is the bad guy. A racist is a bad guy. My culture demands evaluation. Is this guy O.K.? Is Japan O.K. ?

I want to know; so, being American, without a second thought, I ask Kenji, "What exactly do you mean? Who hates ? Hates who? Just dislikes, or *really* hates?"

The perky waitress comes up to the table, bows, refills our cups with green tea, and then bows. Kenji leans back against the red vinyl of the booth, and I read the block letters on his black sweatshirt, "In Paradice, Just Another Days."

I've lived here long enough that I should not still be shocked when someone simply does not answer a question, and yet I am. Kenji tilts his head, his eyes grow slightly larger and he looks past me, or through me, as if in confusion at my prying. He says nothing.

It seems that the conversation, or at least this topic, is over. Any further prodding from me would be trying to squeeze blood from a stone. I meet my old nemesis: the fog of supposed incomprehension of that which does not want to be discussed. (Remember: no actors, just verbs.) My further curiosity will undoubtedly meet only a quiet stepping aside, a silence in the face of my clutching.

And so I have it. Another entry in my installment course in releasing, in letting go. But my brain is steeped in the English language, that cult of exactitude. I want a yes or a no. I want him to explain to me just what he means. English is the international language of science and industry: a tool with precision. But this is not the Way.

We Americans believe that communication is an absolute. We cling to our values as facts. This way of thinking, this belief system, veers right off the Japanese haze of gentle subtlety, of interpretation, of nuances blending into each other. Perhaps this is why Japanese are so much closer to their poets.

So my mind throws its hands into the air—as if after trying to figure a Zen koan for too many years—and rests, if still a bit uneasily, with this uncertainty wriggling around my brain.

I baste my yaki. □

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PHILIP TERRY

# Do-It-Yourself Fable

1. WOULD YOU LIKE TO READ the fable about the fox and the crow?
*If yes, go to 4.*
*If no, go to 2.*

2. Would you prefer the one about the fox and the raven?
*If yes, go to 12.*
*If no, go to 3.*

3. Would you prefer the one about the vixen and the cock?
*If yes, go to 6.*
*If no, go to 1.*

4. A crow sat in a tree holding in his beak a piece of red meat that he had stolen.
*If you would prefer meat of another color, go to 9.*
*If this color suits you, go to 5.*

5. A fox, longing for the prize, began to flatter the bird with honeyed words.
*If you wish to know how the fox flattered the bird, go to 7.*
*If not, go to 14.*

6. A vixen, attracted by the scent of something, followed her nose to a tree in which sat a cock, holding in his talons a piece of Edam cheese.
*If you would prefer another opening, go to 8.*
*If not, go to 11.*

7. "Ah, you blessed bird," said the fox, "the delight of gods and men! What beautiful plumes you have, what bright eyes and what gracefulness of form! Your shimmering breast is like an eagle's, and your sharp talons would



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be a match for any beast. Why," said he, "if you could but sing with a voice answerable to the rest of your excellent qualities, the sun in the firmament could not show the world another such creature."

*If you wish the bird to sing, go to 14.*
*If not, go to 10.*

8. A vixen approached a cock in a farmyard and said: "I wonder if you can sing as well as your father did."

*If you wish to know more about the cock's father, go to 13.*
*If not, go to 16.*

9. A crow sat in a tree holding in his beak a piece of gray ish meat that he had stolen.

*If you prefer meat of anothe color, go to 4.*
*If this color suits you, go to 5.*

10. "They say foxes are both sly and untrustworthy," said the bird, having carefully moved his lunch from his beak with the claws of one foot, "but you must be myopic as well. I no more resemble an eagle than you do a lion. I am black from head to toe, though I resemble the eagle in one thing— I am not given to song."

*If you wish the fox to make a riposte, go to 18.*
*If not, go to 23.*

11. "Oh, Edam," said the vixen scornfully. "That's for mice. Where I live I dine only on the finest gas tronomic delights."

*If you wish to know which gastronomic delights, go to 17.*
*If not, go to 26.*

12. A raven sat on a branch holding in his beak a cut of meat that he had stolen.

*If you wish to know from where the raven stole his meat, consult the fable "An Incon spicuous Purloining" in an earlier volume.*
*If not, go to 5.*

13. There is no further information available on the cock's father.

*If you wish to continue the reading, go to 16.*
*If not, go to 26.*

14. Thus persuaded to burst into song the bird opened his beak, croaked for all he was worth, and dropped his lunch, which was immediately snapped up by the fox. "Ha!" he sneered, "you have a fine voice all right; you have everything, in fact—except brains."

*If you wish to know the moral of this fable, go to 15.*
*If not, go to 26.*

15. There is hardly any man living that may not be won over by flattery, for all of us delight in seeing our best qualities magnified. But when it comes to be applied to a vain fool, it serves only to magnify his own vanity.

*If you are satisfied with this moral, go to 26.*
*If you would prefer to write a moral of your own, go to 30.*

16. The cock shut his eyes and started to crow for all he was worth. The vixen, seizing her opportunity, took a leap in the direction of the cock and gobbled him up.

*If you would prefer a happier outcome for the cock, go to 22.*
*If not, go to 26.*

17. Moules au gratin, lobster, oysters, mutton in white wine, Cumberland sausage, roast boar, sage derby, smoked cheddar, Stilton, grapes, sorbet and Black Forest gateau, among other rare and exquisite deli cacies.

*If you wish to taste some of these dishes, go out for a meal.*
*If not, go to 21.*

18. "I see," said the fox, who was sly but not myopic. "And indeed, now that I look more closely, I see that you are indeed black from head to toe. Yet what you say, my dear friend, touches me to the marrow, for it is true, alas, that my brothers are often cunning and deceitful. Who am I to deny it? So it is, shamed by their wickedness, that I tread this earth in penance for crimes I did not commit. Yet enough of this sorrow. Had I the time, I would love you to tell me more about yourself, my friend, for I know now that you are a straight talker like myself, but I am hungry and must go."

*If you wish the fox to go, go to 23.*
*If not, go to 19.*

19. "Stay a while," said the bird, moved by the fox's tender words, "and share my lunch with me." Whereupon he tossed the fox the lion's share of his lunch.

*If you wish the narrative to continue, go to 20.*
*If not, go to 24.*

20. The fox gobbled up his hard-won prize and went on his way.

*If you wish to know the moral of this fable, goto 27.*
*If not, go to 26.*



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21. The embarrassed cock, ashamed to be seen eating mouse food by a great specialist in the art of dining, hastily dropped the cheese. With practiced ease the vixen sprang into the air, caught it, and ate it up.
*If you wish to know the moral of this fable, go to 28.*
*If not, go to 26.*

22. The cock closed his eyes and sang for all he was worth, at which point the vixen seized him and fled. At once the villagers ran out shouting: "Look, the vixen has got our cock!" "Do you hear them?" said the cock to the vixen. "They say I'm theirs, not yours. Why don't you tell them how wrong they..." "Speak when you're spoken to," interrupted the vixen, at once recognizing her blunder. As she opened her mouth, the cock escaped and flew up into a tree. He settled down to his lunch of bread and stolen meat.
*If you want to know what happened next, go to 5.*
*If not, go to 29.*

23. Would you like to know the moral of this fable?
*If yes, go to 25.*
*If no, go to 26.*

24. Would you like to know the moral of this fable?
*If yes, go to 27.*
*If no, go to 26.*

25. Flattery gets you nowhere.

26. In this case, the fable is at an end.

27. If at first you don't succeed, try again.

28. There is no moral. The fable is at an end.

29. The moral of this fable is that it is foolish to attempt things without giving them due consideration beforehand.

30.

RICHARD ROBBINS

## Sonnet Waiting in Line to Hear Seamus Heaney

I came early because the leprechauns
would be there first, scuttling under the door
beyond the ticket takers and the men
behind me arguing, "Shakespeare. Chaucer.

Which is best?" while Minneapolis burned
—sort of, the Beats museumed next door
at the Walker (Kerouac drunk, Ginsberg
naked everywhere), while outside Henry Moore

and Giacometti sang in living bronze.
What did it mean when she asked, "What's he write on?"
and he answered, "Nature. Bog-men. The arts."
What's it mean when history calls word to earth

to word, when later little people stand,
their faces screwed favorably, clapping small hands.



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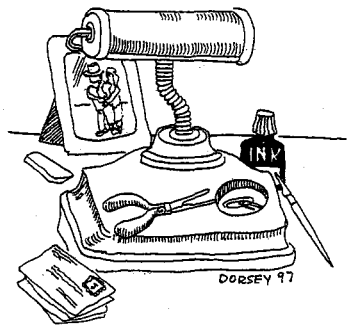
# The Seeing Place

ROBERT L. KING

BY PLAYING OTHELLO as a white man in a black world, Patrick Stewart hoped to "encourage a much broader view of the fundamentals of racism." He had long wanted to act the Moor, but when he was experienced enough to do it, the times made it unacceptable "for a white actor to put on a blackface and pretend to be African." Pretending, of course, is at the heart of theatrical representation, and Stewart expands on that idea when he calls his vision of *Othello* a "photo-negative," a form of imitation as reversal, something literally exact but capable of surprising. The viewer, settled into habits of accepting the evidence of the camera's eye, must imagine black as white and white as black. As a result, the very act of seeing is held up for questioning. Decades ago, Peter Shaffer's *Black Comedy* worked in a strikingly similar, more literal way—the audience was required to imagine that the characters on a lighted stage were in darkness. Trusting our eyes, we would forget the basic conceit until, say, someone walked into a piece of furniture or spoke of a present character as if he weren't there. The physical humor and dramatic irony were made fresh by Shaffer's premise, but the incongruities dissolved in laughter.

Under Jude Kelly's direction of *Othello* at Washington's Shakespeare Theatre, reversals and recognitions had more enduring worth. Besides Stewart in the title role, only one other speaking part, Bianca's, was played by a white. Three others had walk-ons as Brabantio's household staff. By the time Iago's influence begins to cloud Othello's vision, Stewart's whiteness has become a fact of performance, easy to overlook. So when he says to us in soliloquy, "Haply for I am black," we are reminded of a dramatic truth which our senses tell us is false: "I am black" is wrong because the speaker is obviously white; but white is wrong because Othello is black. This disruptive moment, like others in the production, brings color to the forefront of our attention and makes us think about its dramatic and social weight.

In the first scene, Iago's performance confuses color and race in the production's riskiest gesture. When Roderigo tells Brabantio that his "fair daughter" is in "the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor," Iago faces front in a half squat, sways, swings his drooping arms before him and whoops like a chimpanzee. This offensive stereotype is undeniably racist, yet it is enacted by and for a black man. If it is meant to mirror the white audience's prejudices, it is little more than reverse racism, arrogant in its sweeping assumptions. Perhaps it is meant to be symptomatic of racism learned and absorbed by its victims. Whatever thoughts Iago's action prompted, we were thinking about race and participating in the performance, not waiting for a distancing classic to wash over us with placating truisms. Typically, the production both raised questions about race and held the answers back.




The place of performance contributed to the play's biggest laugh and added a political dimension to Ron Canada's Iago. He echoes Brabantio's style when he answers "Thou art a villain" with "You are—a senator." Inside the Beltway, real and would-be political insiders laughed knowingly at Shakespeare's joke. Canada's blunt Iago punched out lines like this one and gestured to his crotch at words that need no footnotes. Not oily enough by half, he bothered me because Iago should insinuate himself more quietly into Othello's confidence. Shakespeare's rhetoric of indirection, I thought, calls for understated delivery. While that standard may apply to a Renaissance villain schooled in the arts of persuasion, I came to realize that Canada's 1997 Iago gave us the modern manipulator, the brazen insider whose power confers all the authority that his audiences want or need. This Iago looked very much like Clarence Thomas and had his sure command over false testimony about Desdemona.

In the first scene of Act 4, Iago printed four accusations against Desdemona on a white display board. In the text, his tone is guarded; "to kiss in private" is part of a question and "give a handkerchief" is conditioned by "if." In Iago's show-and-tell presentation, the qualifiers were omitted and the tone became absolute. As Othello responded to each item, he checked it off in agreement. To cap his argument, Iago printed "Desdemona" large and underlined the middle "demon" twice. The form seemed to make Othello a partner in discovering the truth, but it patronized him much as a corporate or government "seminar" would.



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Iago's device was on the level of a visual aid for the learning impaired, yet Shakespeare's own emphasis on seeing gave it a grounding in the text.

Among his first words in the play, Othello says, "I must be found," for as a military hero he lives in the public eye. Later, this least introspective of Shakespeare's major tragic figures demands from Iago "ocular proof" of Desdemona's infidelity, and he is duped by what he sees. In *Othello* the ratio is: seeing is to proof as heroic reputation is to ethical character. Color, then, is one of several misleading appearances; in Shakespeare, as in the Kelly/Stewart *Othello*, it is finally irrelevant to what really makes us humane.

Stewart's stature as an actor made him stand out from the rest of the cast. Professionally, he was the Other, a classically trained veteran of the Royal Shakespeare Company, restrained in voice and movement. His restraint drew us into his performance while the busy gestures and declamatory tone of other actors instructed us how to react. Stewart's slight, indulgent smiles at Desdemona's girlishness stressed his advantages over her in age and experience. She was a loved possession, the trophy earned by the dangers he had passed on his journey to a good reputation. As a result, his easy leap to jealousy was entirely credible. Stewart's characteristic posture, arms at his sides and head erect, argued to serene self-confidence in a stage world of whirling arms and busy movement. He turned the murder of Desdemona into a chilling ritual, as deliberate as the famous speech that precedes it. His literally white, morally gray Othello was a child of our time; Canada's loud, cocksure Iago was equally provocative. Political persuasion is too often bluster from a hollow chest.

THE ETYMOLOGY OF *theater*, "seeing place," has appealed to some critics as a premise for their theories of drama. Television, in contrast, may be called a thing for seeing; its place—family room, kitchen counter, limo—doesn't matter. Some TVs are portable. A television audience can lower sound, turn off the set or leave the room; the experience is rarely communal. Neither the play nor its audience can truly exist outside of theater's essential place. Dennis Potter wrote *Brimstone and Treacle* on commission for BBC television only to have it suppressed as "nauseating." If the programming director's decision led Potter to rewrite the script for the stage, it was one act of censorship to applaud, for the theater focuses our visual and moral attention on Potter's tough message as no picture tube possibly could.

The intimacy of the Woolly Mammoth Theatre in Washington contributed to the powerful effects created by an excellent cast. The lights came up on a slightly off-kilter set to reveal a young woman strapped in a hospital bed at center stage. Her hands, folded in at the wrist, are held like useless pecking instruments near her shoulders. Her head is flopped to one side, and her gaze is directed toward some far place. She is beautiful.

To her left, her mother serves dinner, only a sandwich, to Tom, as dour a father and husband as the two women could have. His cutting the sandwich as if it were a full dinner raises a few chuckles. His too solicitous wife, Amy, waits for his approval as a servant might. He resents her having spent the day caring for their daughter, feeding her and changing her. Amy wants to believe that Pattie's grunts and screams mean that she will one day speak again, that she comprehends more than she can communicate. Several of her "Yaah"s punctuate her parent's comments and seem to affirm that hope. For his part, Tom can't endure Amy's optimism: "There is no God, there are no morals. Stop hoping." She counters that: "Without faith, we should just be animals, animals in the dark." All the while, a bare bulb hangs over their daughter, traumatized to an animal level in an automobile accident of which her father may be the ultimate cause.

Into this closed world—"We never go out," Amy complains—comes Martin, who has "collided" with Tom at a rail station and has his wallet. Martin claims that he proposed to Pattie two years earlier, that she asked him to wait for her answer and that he has been out of the country. It's news to Amy, but she welcomes him nonetheless. Tom questions him, and Martin is vague about where he spent the two years and about what happened to the forty pounds in Tom's wallet. Saying he sees no real change in the Pattie he knew, Martin offers to care for her now. Love is the constant for him, not "just words" as Tom says. Tom agrees reluctantly to let him stay one night, the opening wedge for the diabolical Martin. Soon, he is cleaning, cooking eggs to Tom's grudging approval and spoon-feeding Pattie. He begins to call Amy "Mumsy" and, Tom having left for his day's work, persuades her to get her hair done. Alone with Pattie, he lowers the head of the bed until she is flat, he lifts her, turns her head toward the audience, coos to her as he feels for her "boo-boos" and with the intense light narrowing and music rising, he rapes her. Short of looking away or closing its eyes, the theater audience cannot avoid this deliberately disturbing scene. The time of seeing is a moment of painful truth that serves as prelude to a broader, more disturbing one.

*Brimstone and Treacle* was banned by the BBC ten years after Edward Bond's *Saved* was the last play banned by the Lord Chamberlain. Of the shocking scene that closed down his play, Bond has written:

> Clearly the stoning to death of a baby in a London park is a typical English understatement. Compared to the "strategic" bombing of German towns it is a negligible atrocity, compared to the cultural and emotional deprivation of most of our children its consequences are insignificant.

Potter's theatrical argument works in much the same way as Bond's. After the intensity of the rape, the house returns to its aberrant normality. Tom in his cardigan mind and Amy with her new hairdo



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have been promised "any pudding from all the kingdoms on earth" by Martin in a clear, reductive allusion to Satan's temptation of Christ. Pattie is more subdued than we have seen her; maybe she has benefited from Martin's shock therapy. Then, Martin leads Tom step by incriminating step into a conversation about politics and society. We can sit back for a quiet conversation, a break from the tension. Tom's fascist National Front beliefs include putting "blacks on cattle trucks" and purging England of curry eaters. He and Martin have something in common; the day can come to its rounded end. After Tom and Amy retire for the night, Martin positions Pattie for another rape. Now, however, she has learned to scream for help; her parents interrupt the unzipped Martin, who flees. Pattie's voice struggles toward articulation:

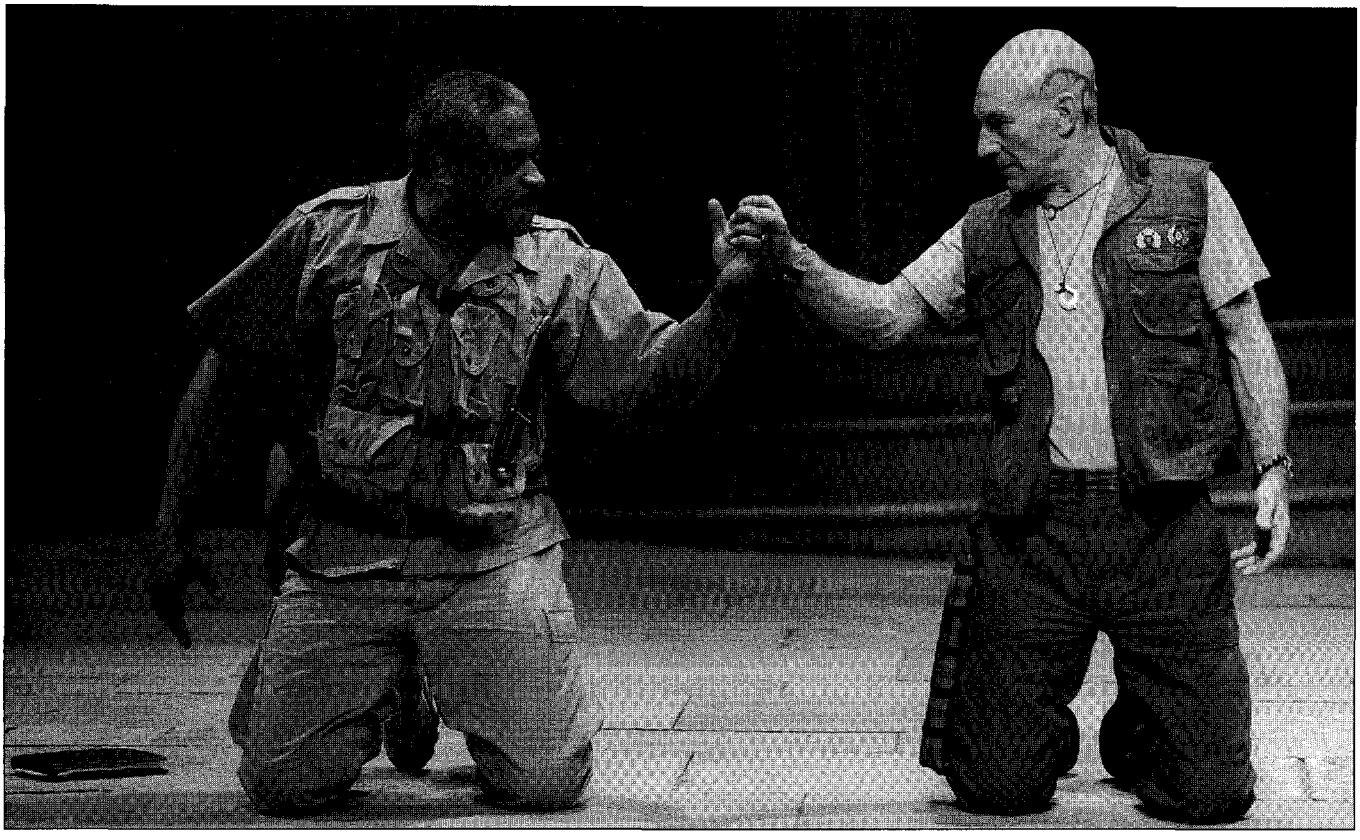
"Wha...What...What happened?"

She seems to be asking about the attacks until she shouts "Daddy" and ends the play with her loudest and most pained scream. Whether Tom was responsible for the auto accident or whether he abused her as Martin has, Potter's point is like Bond's: Polite, pervasive racism renders the deeply disturbing sights we have endured in the stage fiction "negligible." Tom, not Martin, is the play's great evil, the obscenity that theater forces us to see. As in the Kelly/Stewart *Othello*, literal sight leads to insight.

The Woolly Mammoth cast was excellent. Nancy Robinette acted Amy to gushing perfection; Mitchell Hebert tucked in his chin like the confident middle-class moralist, and Christopher Lane was suitable civilized as our modern devil. In his one over-the-top speech, directed to the audience, he worked himself up to a preacher's frenzy, adding an "ah" syllable to some words just as Jimmy Swaggart did in his heyday as moralist and betrayer. As Pattie, Rhea Seehorn more than met the great demands of being always at center stage; she was both spastic and controlled, passive and active.

*IN WALKS ED* is Keith Glover's fourth play to be produced in under three years. From New York's Public Theatre to New Haven's Long Wharf, his work has been seen in ten regional theaters. He is thirty-two, he acts and he directed *In Walks Ed* both in Cincinnati where it won the Rosenthal New Play Prize and at Long Wharf. The play's subtitle, *The Essence of Soul in a Late Night Mode*, leads an audience to expect a profound treatment of the black experience; "essence" and "soul," after all, are two great abstractions. The summary phrase we hear at the play's end, however, more accurately labels what we have seen: "a tale of chocolate told with funk." Glover's admitted borrowings include comic books and the Western; his tale's premise owes a debt to *The Visit*.

At the back of a basement bar a staircase leads to street level with just enough of the outside visible to reveal the legs of a woman who comes fully into view as she struts down the stairs. She dances sensuously to "Thirteen men and I'm the Only Girl in Town." Three black men, one in a leather jacket and two in long leather coats, enter as a chorus of sorts. An amplified voice announces: "This is of course me. Your guy on this journey... This vast mystic dream. I think we'll call it *In Walks Ed*." Ed's last name, Paladin, clearly signals his role, and when he enters, he does what any self-respecting gunslinger would do—



CAROL ROSEGG



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he orders a drink. The owner of the bar, Sky, recognizes Ed by his voice and by his favorite drink, Cutty Sark and 7-Up. Ed has been away fifteen years and has returned just as an Italian mob leader has been killed in Ed's signature way, two shots to the heart and one between the eyes. That mobster, Gianelli, turned Ed into a hired killer in exchange for the fifteen-year exile; in return, Gianelli made a pledge not to harm Darlene, Ed's seventeen-year-old girl friend. She was wounded back then, has not heard from Ed since and has become a police officer in a housing development. Bennie, a black mobster and Gianelli's rival, put out a contract on Darlene to lure Ed back, knowing that he would return only to protect her.

Money, then, measures the value of life in the play's basic situation, and it is a dramatic presence throughout. Like Claire in the Dürrenmatt *Visit*, Ed has a bundle of cash with him. To expose the hypocrisy of the townspeople, Claire says, "I will buy justice"; with money as the means, she will "roll back time." Ed intends his million dollars for Darlene, a payback for leaving her years before; it is his attempt at rolling them back to when they were lovers. The other characters aren't distracted by any generous thoughts. Sky needs money to pay off his debts and keep the bar. Pete Baez, a seventeen-year-old underling for Bennie, sees the money as his chance to open a bodega and to help his pregnant girlfriend. Bennie had the gangster's unspoken motives.

All this lusting after money leads to several betrayals and reversals with Ed tied up from the end of Act 1 into Act 2. The inefficient Pete is left to guard him by Bennie and Sky, both of whom should know better, and Darlene frees him. Although Pete holds a sawed-off shotgun, Darlene slaps him for calling her a bitch, and he is powerless before her. Finally Bennie lies dead; Ed has given Pete a thick roll of one-hundred dollar bills so he can make something of himself; Ed has retrieved $100,000 worth of stamps from the turncoat Sky, and he leaves with Darlene and the million dollars. At the very end, Sky sweeps out circles of light on the floor recalling Emmet Kelly's famous finale. The long fight between Bennie and Darlene, who has accepted the challenge for Ed, is choreographed in slow motion. Other departures from stage realism include Ed's occasional slow-motion walk and a shift in lighting for Sky's monologue about his life and love. Most important to the playwright-director is the business that accompanies any exposure of the million dollars: a light shines on the case and loud music thumps. These semaphores to the audience are apparently intended to give the play a symbolic layer or two, and the play calls itself a "parable" in its concluding moments. Glover's characters attempt general truths now and then: "Life on the street always ends in death, man" and "Laws of nature is a sonuvabitch." The sum of all these parts, though, is less than what the subtitle promises. For all its fine acting and production values, *In Walks Ed* is an entertainment that offers no metaphoric soul food to nourish our social consciences.

I WAS DRAWN TO *Geography* in its world premiere at Yale Rep because Ralph Lemon "conceived and directed" it to investigate intersections of "race, politics, and cultural differences." It is more than a performance piece to Lemon: "It is equally and importantly an anthropological collaboration about being American, African, brown, black, blue black, male and artist." Joining the director in the cast were nine dancers and percussionists from Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and the United States. The text by Tracie Morris was cut from its original submission of twenty-one pages to three and a half. I cannot judge whether the rhythms of dance and percussion truly demonstrated the culture clashes and assimilation that *Geography* aimed for; any differences between African and American styles were not so apparent as to make a point about politics and culture. The opening dialogue was spoken in tones so deliberately soft that the words were lost to the audience. What we did hear lacked an informing context and struck me as pretentious: "in this/ in this heaven/ in this heaven/ like/ hell." The blare of a siren and the noise of a jet stood for contemporary references, but not exclusively Western ones. A wall of bed springs was replaced by dozens of hanging liquor bottles, both open to bi-cultural readings. The last word, "Now I've got something to see," has in various forms become an overworked formula that is supposed to open the work rather than simply end it. What we have seen made exhausting demands on the performers and absorbed us in their energy and art. The collaboration among the artists was apparent more in their mutual warmth at curtain calls than it was in *Geography* itself.

MARK LAMOS ROUNDED his seventeen years at Hartford Stage by revisiting *Cymbeline*, the first Shakespeare he directed there. The opening lines of the play are so crowded with information that an audience could easily miss things it needs to know later. So Lamos brought out the full cast at the start to mime their relationships as the exposition was given—another one of his many inventive devices that illuminated Shakespeare's play without distorting it. Magical symbols hung over the playing space in the thrust theater; like the golden Jupiter descending on wires, they were there to be seen through as stage images of drama's artificially real magic. Lamos's productions of Shakespeare have invariably surprised us to fresh awareness. When he admitted cutting off Cloten's head, Guiderius spoke like a proud, enthusiastic boy, and we were reminded where and how he lived all his life. A minor character, Philharmonous, was costumed like a pilgrim and carried a staff; he moved with his eyes on a distant horizon, one beyond our imaginings. At Hartford, Lamos opened our eyes to worlds outside our own. We are sure to miss him. □



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# Czechoslovakia's Last Day:
## Meeting Katarzyna

GARY GILDNER

WHEN WE MET Katarzyna in the High Tatras I did not think of Warsaw, her native city, but of Vienna. She would almost shine in Vienna, where so many shop windows glitter with riches and half of the city seems to have issued from luxury hotels or embassies or five-star restaurants to take the successful air of the place. Despite what she told us, that she had no more money and could finally *breathe*, I could see her sitting quite at home in an open horse cab wearing a hat and coat of matching fur—and then saying to her companion after he pointed out the Prime Minister and his wife strolling past St. Stephen's Cathedral, "Oh, really? But they look like everyone else." We in fact did see the PM and his wife out strolling one day; our friend Ziggy, who lives in Vienna and was showing us around, indicated them to us: a handsome couple, and indeed they did blend into the whole—no one was making a fuss at their presence—but for that reason I think Katarzyna would be disappointed. High glamour was missing, not even an attending policeman, and they were on foot!

What would amuse her? The hotel where Mozart wrote "The Marriage of Figaro"? Where Freud lived? Schubert's birthplace? Look, imbedded into stone beside St. Stephen's main entrance there is an ancient circle, a measurement, which decreed the minimum size a loaf of bread could be. You could place your small loaf against the circle and expose your stingy baker to the world! "No, no, my angel," she would say to her companion, "none of these things amuses me now." But she *does* need to do something because she has had enough of this horse cab, you understand? She has given up roulette, given up blackjack—and thank God, too: the fortune she lost! not to mention almost her life!—but she has given up cigarettes, as well, and she would like something to do with her hands right now.

"Perhaps a coffee and cake aboard the Johann Strauss?" he suggests.

"Yes," she sighs, "that might be fun."

Katarzyna is a large-breasted big woman with flowing blond hair. It is clear that in front of her mirror she takes her time. The day we met her she had already changed clothes three times and would change once more before the night was over. It was New Year's Eve. She and her companion Rudy and her son Franz had brought the train from Warsaw to Zakopane, and from there a hired taxi took them across the Slovak border and forty miles down to Tatranska Lomnica and the Grand Hotel Praha. She changed into a skiing costume because Rudy had produced cross-country skis; but this adventure did not prove satisfying—she kept falling down. Rudy said, "Well, the trails are too slick today. Perhaps tomorrow there will be fresh snow." Franz, who was fifteen, was having a fine time on his skis, but Katarzyna declared she had had enough of this for one day so they all returned to the hotel to change clothes for a light supper, and then rest up for the gala, indeed historic, party the Praha was throwing that night. Lizzie and I met them at the light supper.

WE WERE STAYING in Zdiar, a small folk village roughly halfway between Zakopane and Tatranska Lomnica, in the home of Pan a Pani Vojtasak. David and Sophie. They had three rooms upstairs that they rented out, rooms that David finished off in knotty pine and that Sophie furnished with thick down comforters sewn with her own hands; mornings a great white light entered the valley and bounced off the snow-covered hills across the road. We had the middle room, a Hungarian family on one side of us, a German family on the other. Lizzie and I never had a real conversation with either family, although we laughed a lot with the Germans in goofy pidgin while making popcorn and telling about our days: "Oh la-la" and "zoom!" They had two boys, aged 9 and 12, and all four were a sunny, peppy lot come there, as we all had, to ski. The Hungarians were dark and mostly silent and in our communal kitchen they kept their foodstuffs and utensils clearly separate. They had a boy and girl about the same ages as the German kids, but the four youngsters never mixed that I could see. On Christmas morning Lizzie tried to tell the Hungarian father that we had enjoyed hearing—through the wall between us—the lovely flute music they had played the previous evening. Apparently understanding only the part about the music coming through the wall, he said, defensively, "Problem? Problem?"

We arrived in Zdiar two days before Christmas, taking the bus up from gray, gloomy Presov with our

ELIZABETH SLOAN



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bags and skis and, unknown to me, some tree decorations that Lizzie had a plan for. Our first day we walked through the village whose simple wooden houses went back to a time before Communism was even thought of, bought things to cook and drink, got giddy over a horse-drawn sleigh passing by, the horse dropping its steaming pucky in the road, the sun easing down behind the mountains turning the sky a plum color, ice forming in my beard. Beside the road the Biela River ran clear and sparkled in moonlight and even in those places where it ran under snow-covered ice we could still hear it, and we sang out, "Nothing like Presov!" That night we raised our glasses to Nadia, my colleague, who had asked her friend Viera to find us a room, private rooms and hotels in that region being booked months in advance—a year in advance—and we hoped to see her soon. We also had Nadia to thank for our skis and boots. We had followed her one night to a cavernous warehouse somewhere under the university where one man produced what we wanted and another man, portly, obviously important judging from how Nadia and the first man kept smiles ready in case he looked at them, busied himself with an ink pen he needed to poise just so over the paper laid out for his signature. When he finished scratching his name he blew on the ink as if it, or his name—or both—were wonderful delicate creations, like parts of a soup, and he had not had a bite of anything hot all day! But eventually he turned the narrow Mongolian eyes in his fleshy face at smiling Nadia and allowed her to have the paper.

I think of Nadia now in Vienna. She has arrived for the day with her shopping bag containing the sandwiches she brought from Slovakia and which she will eat in a quiet place outdoors, watching the lucky strollers who issue from this luxury hotel or that museum or that open horse cab. That's all she does here—look. I wonder what she and Katarzyna would say to each other if they were introduced, the one who can afford to come to Vienna only for the day, and only if she brings her own food, the other who left her homeland twenty years ago and scooped up so much money at the gaming tables of Monte Carlo she would have died from it but for this angel you see beside her, this lovely man Rudy. Rudy smiles. Franz smiles too, in his necktie and blazer.

"Elegant, no?" Katarzyna says to us. "At his Swedish school he must dress like this, and why not? It is very exclusive, very expensive, and Franz loves it, don't you darling?" Franz says, "I can speak five languages, so I guess it's a pretty good school." "You are like me," his mother says, "I pick up language like this!" and she snaps her fingers, makes that motion anyway, but there is no actual snap, only a *fip*, because of the long formal gloves she wears. She also wears a red low-cut evening gown showing her creamy shoulders and decides we must have wine—yes, Rudy?—for the party is about to begin! We drink a toast with three travelers from Warsaw about whom we know almost nothing yet except that they have come to the High Tatras to be amused (the Czechs and Slovaks are breaking up at midnight, are they not? a divorce like this does not happen every day)—and we have joined their table at the Grand Hotel Praha's New Year's Eve party in our hiking boots and jeans because earlier we'd stopped at the hotel for something to eat to warm us up for the trip back to Zdiar and heard this very American voice at the next table offer to gloss the menu for us. The voice belonged to Rudy.

"There's not much," he said. "The cabbage soup is O.K. I understand they're saving the good stuff for the party."

"Are you coming?" the woman beside him suddenly asked us.

"We didn't know about it."

"There will be two empty chairs at our table," she said.

"Sure," Rudy said, "think about it."

So we stayed because we had spent eight days in storybook Zdiar skiing and hiking and that morning decided to spend New Year's Eve poking around somewhere else. We rode the bus over to Stary Smokovec, which is the oldest resort in the High Tatras, and bought postcards, window shopped, had fun doing nothing really, and then went up to The Grand Hotel (1904) for roast trout served to us by waiters in tuxedos in an elegant room. Over our wine we got an idea. After this, why not walk the six or seven kilometers up Tatranska Lomnica—which was on the way to Zdiar—and have dinner at *its* Grand Hotel? Lunch and dinner in Grand Hotels back to back on New Year's Eve! On Czechoslovakia's last day! Why indeed not! Outside, big fat snowflakes were floating down in our faces, and Lizzie said, "We're inside one of those glass bowls you shake up. Hang on, Doctor."

Halfway to Tatranska Lomnica we noticed a very handsome hotel-looking building whose sign said SKOLA. It didn't look like any school we had seen in Slovakia; there were tiers of private balconies for sitting out in the sun or under the stars, an overall shine to the place. A woman carrying skis came along, rosy-cheeked, athletic, clearly refreshed from her day on the slopes, and we spoke, introduced ourselves, said we were curious about this beautiful school that looked like, well, a posh hotel. "Ah," she said, beaming, gazing at it. When her small son Marek came rushing up to hug her knees, she said, "I have a nice Moravian vodka inside—and cookies for Marek—would you like to sit?"

We followed them into the bright, clean building, passed several bulletin boards with children's bright drawings on them, and went up to her room. Her name was Zuzana. She used to be with the Education Ministry, she told us, but three years ago there were "many changes" (she scowled—clearly revolution wasn't her cup), and so now she taught at the Teachers College in Bratislava, the capital. For years she and other members of the Ministry and their children had had use of the skola for their winter holidays, though after this winter, she sighed, it was doubtful that they



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could return. Her eyes followed Marek's hand as he drew blue crayon circles on a piece of paper. "Faces," she smiled at us. Then, "The school is for sick children who come here to breathe, from all over, even Africa, and don't you think it's beautiful?" Again we said we did. I also thought of Nadia; she too had been a member of the Party. It was remarkable how much these women —especially in the eyes—seemed to resemble each other.

Katarzyna's eyes, however, glitter. I am sure they glittered even on the sleeper that she and Rudy and Franz brought down from Warsaw under the Polish stars. She too is a star, flecks of silver and gold appear on her eyelids, on a plum-colored background reminding me of night coming down over Zdiar, applied with a brush, with the hand of an artist. "I must write my life story," she announces, "it will make a fantastic movie. Fantastic!" And she smooths out the long white formal gloves she wears, admiring the fit around her fingers, the diamonds sparkling at her wrist, her bare upper arms and shoulders, her ample breasts and red gown—all of it—admiring all of it as if in this brilliant moment the cameras are actually rolling. Franz says, "Red and white are the colors of Poland." But Katarzyna doesn't hear him, or chooses not to. And why should she? Poland is only a country, she resides in the heavens. At the light supper two hours before when we first met and she was all in black, tight-fitting sleek black from neck to knees, her hat, also black, circled out, out, like the rings around a planet, and then she held her head just so, one glittering eye peeked out from under the brim like the first star of evening. And now behold her, perhaps an entire galaxy.

"Well," Lizzie says, "don't you all look nice."

"Oh, it's just something I put on for tonight," Katarzyna says.

Her men bow in their dark jackets; there is a light sky-blue tie on Franz, a deep red one on Rudy: nice compliments to the lady.

"I come from Minnesota," Rudy says. "Educated in St. Paul. For the past two years, I've been living in Warsaw."

"This makes me very happy," Katarzyna says. "And you?" she asks us.

"Wait," Rudy says. "May I guess? Your accents are Midwest. I'd say Illinois."

"Very close," Lizzie says. "Iowa."

"Actually," he says, "I *was* going to say western Illinois. Dialect is a small hobby of mine."

"Angel, please, may I interrupt? I know these waiters, and I know we should order as soon as possible. We must have wine—yes, Rudy? And lots of water. Once the party begins we will never see them."

A ticket to the party costs 600 crowns. This gives you a dinner of caviar eggs with ham, beefsteak Carmen, potatoes, rice, and vodka. The ticket also allows you to choose from a lavish buffet laid out with suckling pig, beef, fowl, fish, cakes, sweets designed like little castles, salads, fruits, compotes, on and on, and for these things you pay extra. But the basic ticket—or 1200 crowns for two—represents one-third of Nadia's monthly salary at the university. At the current rate of exchange 1200 crowns is about $40. Katarzyna has suggested that Rudy order two bottles of wine, one red, one white, two bottles of Russian champagne ("It's the best, of course!"), five bottles of mineral water, a liter of orange juice, and a couple of Pepsi's. Rudy gets all this done, in Polish, and Katarzyna says to him, "*Dobrze, dobrze.*" Good, good. Soon she will say much more, she is eager to talk, to produce verbal glittering snapshots, ritzy details, all focused on money and glamour and intrigue; the Mafia is involved too, oh yes, and how she paid them back, every cent, and how she lost her film business in Warsaw, how she had left Poland twenty years ago and returned three years ago to sell, sell, and then took that money and threw it all away at roulette, blackjack ("Quick, quick, I wanted quick results, everything on one card, one little bounce!"), but oddly nothing about the recent great political changes, the fall of Communism, and very little about Rudy except that he was the angel who saved her. Yes, who *is* this angel from Minnesota? "Actually, I speak nine languages," he says after ordering, "and you'd think Polish would be easy for me. But it's not." The wine arrives quickly. We raise our glasses, a clarinet is squealing in the background.

ON CHRISTMAS EVE, our first full day of skiing in Zdiar, we found a trail that ran beside the Biela River and then cut up into the hills following another stream. It went up and up and often we stopped to catch our breath or to admire the icy stream, the surprising patterns it made, the silvery skyscapes and rugged faces; all around us it was wonderfully quiet except for the rushing water and some wind in the pines, and then we came to a great wide meadow with a small barn in the middle of it. A trough built around three sides of the barn was full of hay, and lining the meadow were trails made by animals that came down from the timber to feed there.

"Do you know what this *is*, Gary?"

We sat beside the barn feeling lucky and ate our apples and bread and imagined the meadow with animals on it in the moonlight; and then off a ways we saw a small wooden shed almost hidden by trees and a snowdrift. We went over to it. It was an observation post. In an hour or so it would be dusk and we could be in there, watching. We thought about it. We really wanted to do it. But we'd have to spend the night in the shed because we couldn't ski back in the dark, the going was mostly downhill and in places steep and too close to the icy stream; and if we stayed the night we'd have to give up Midnight



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Mass in Zdiar. We wanted to do both. We fell back in the snow and made angels in all that quiet space.

"A manger," Lizzie whispered, as if she still could not believe our luck.

Eight days later I keep wanting to stop Katarzyna to ask about the spaces between the glittering snapshots, because I am more interested in what she isn't telling than the piles of chips she is scooping up. "I was rich, so rich you can't imagine, but a woman without a country. I am Polish of course but nowhere does it say that. My passport says Swedish. Impossible! Like my life. Which I must write down, yes? I play number 6, it wins, number 3, it wins. Who is this woman? Everyone wants to know."

In the light-hearted spirit of the party I ask her, "Yes, how *does* it happen that you carry this impossible Swedish passport?"

She looks at me. "I could tell you stories," she finally says. "Oh, yes."

"I'm listening."

"Well, for example, Franz's father. He marries this Swedish woman— does he know her?—and now he has a Swedish passport. But he is a Pole!"

"Excuse me," Franz says, "what was that? My father married a Swedish woman?"

She looks at him. "Yes, of course."

Franz says, "I don't believe it. He's never told me—"

"It's true, darling."

"What was her name?"

The mother sighs. "I don't remember."

Rudy puts a hand on the boy's shoulder, says something I don't catch, something soothing, manly, because Franz finally smiles and shrugs as if his mother's revelation is not so important. He likes Rudy. Katarzyna likes Rudy too because he has just smoothed over an awkward moment—I can imagine he has done this before—and of course she likes him because he has rescued her. We don't know how exactly; Katarzyna hasn't got to that part yet, she is still winning money hand over fist, in Monte Carlo, in Spain, in Poland too, it seems, although one day the Mafia comes along.

"They watch me, you see, winning all this money. Oh, once in a while I lose and have to go back to my hotel for more, and it's here I am approached, when I am going out for more. Why trouble yourself? they say. We know you are lucky. We will lend you money here, in the casino, and save you time. So I take their money. I run up a tab, is that right, Rudy? A tab?" Rudy nods. Katarzyna smiles. "You see why I must write my life story?"

Not exactly, I think. Not yet, anyway. What about Poland? What about the thugs running things there? But I hold my tongue. I don't want another awkward moment in front of Franz, who is a nice boy. Who has spent his life so far being a nice boy.

WE LEFT THE BARN in the meadow and skied back to Pan a Pani Vojtasak's house watching the sun leave the valley. On the way we broke off a pine bough. In our room Lizzie found a vase for it and put it in a window beyond which stars had come out. Three fat Slovak bulbs hung on the bough and wrapped presents lay underneath it when she was finished. We had spaghetti and lentils and red wine and a real Christmas tree—and candles—and this lovely flute music coming through the wall from the Hungarian side, and when the horse and sleigh went by in the road we heard those tiny bells.

Next morning Viera knocked at our door before breakfast and announced that Nadia had arrived to visit her in the neighboring valley, could we join them? Viera and her husband had a house over there; she fired directions—only a kilometer away, an easy walk for us, tomorrow, yes? Ski, eat something, and comes the darkness, it's O.K., her husband has a car for the journey home.

We went. We were glad to see Nadia and to hear she was feeling better (earlier, in Presov, her ulcers had been acting up). She produced a big box of cookies she had baked and Viera made coffee. Their husbands appeared: Viera's William, the story was, had been Dean of Ideology at the university until the students forced him out in '89 and we were curious to see what a Dean or former Dean of Ideology looked like (he looked like a lot of men who are fit and eat well and enjoy a good joke); Nadia's Tibor, whom we'd heard had left Nadia for a younger woman but had recently come back, might have been the Dean's twin brother. Not having much English they carried on a laughing conversation of their own, and Viera said to us, "Please, understand, they are laughing not at you, only at men they know—they like to—what is the word, Nadia?" "Mimic," Nadia said. "Yes, they


In future numbers of the NAR:

*Fiction by Kathryn Duhamel, Michael Fedo, Peter Cherches, and Judith Shatnoff*

*Poetry by Nance Van Winckel and Kristine A. Somerville*

*Early rumors of this magazine's first-ever story contest (a pending millennial event)*




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like to mimic at them," Viera said. Nadia said she was dying for a cigarette and the others, all non-smokers, shouted, "No! Ski!"

The former Dean of Ideology led us out and stayed in the lead all day. More than once Viera said, "My husband is a *fanatic* for skiing!" Each time, Nadia laughed, and finally Viera said, "This is not a good word?" Yes, it was perfect, Nadia assured her. We skied around the rim of the valley called Bachledova; it was more open than the Zdiar valley, you could see great and beautiful distances, and Nadia said to us, "I could never afford to come here if Viera did not invite me. I am always happy to accept. I feel free." We looked at the long valley running below and in the distance the white hills repeating themselves and the mountain beyond, and I remembered her comment after we left the cavernous room in Presov with our skis: "You will be happy in Zdiar. You will have the two most important things—snow and a warm woman."

Back at the former Dean's house he opened two bottles of beer, which we all shared, and Nadia passed around her box of cookies. "So. Tell us how you are enjoying yourselves among the folk," she said. We told about finding the manger on Christmas Eve and attending Midnight Mass and how wonderfully quiet it was in the hills and how refreshing all this was after Presov, after even Vienna; especially after Vienna, we said. "Oh, really?" Nadia said. "Even after Vienna? Surely you don't mean it." We did mean it and tried to explain about the glitter, and Viera said, "No, no, you are having a joke." So we tried to change the subject; but Nadia wanted us to know what it was like when she went to Vienna, carrying her shopping bag, her food, too poor to afford the prices there. "You understand?"

It was getting dark. The Dean took an old hatchet off the wall and showed it to me. "Peasants," he smiled. "He means peasants used that ax many years ago," Nadia explained. He and Tibor laughed. Then the Dean said to me, "But you, in my opinion, you are Paul Bunyan!" He thought this was enormously funny. So did his twin. I might have thought it was funny too, but I was hungry now, getting a headache, and no one was saying anything about food, although Nadia kept urging more cookies on us. Finally Lizzie and I said we had better go, it was getting late. "Yes," Viera said, "you must be tired." She said nothing about her husband's car, which was fine, we just wanted to leave.

KATARZYNA HAS WON half a million dollars and lost it. She sold her film business in Warsaw and lost that money too. She couldn't stop gambling until the money was all gone. "I had a sickness," she says, slowly peeling off a long white glove. "I needed a thrill, that high you feel just before the little ball stops bouncing, just before the final card is exposed. I needed people to applaud my daring. But that"—the glove completely off now—"is all finished. I am cured. I am poor and happy and lovely Rudy understands this. He is such an angel, you can't imagine." She gives him her bare hand to hold. "You see, I thought I could continue winning forever! And why not? Look at this fantastic luck I have in the beginning, at Monte Carlo, number 6, number 3, every time my number comes up! That's where my story begins—and where the movie should begin too, don't you think?"

She looks at me to say something, and I say, "Why not?"

Rudy says, "Yes, the key was understanding her feeling of inferiority. Once we got that out, the rest was relatively easy."

So that's what Rudy is, I'm thinking, a shrink. Of course. I watch him press her hand between his palms.

They gaze at each other, and he says, "A great success."

She whispers, "Thank you, my sweet."

"Oh no, it is I who thanks *you*."

"This hand you are holding is free," she says. "Free of my sickness."

"Katarzyna is a brave woman," he says.

She lowers her eyes a moment, then gives the rest of us a big smile. A smile that, surely, must be included in the movie of her life.

Rudy picks up his glass. "A toast," he says, "to survival!" We all drink. We are all a part of this movie now, are we not? (If in fact we haven't always been part of it, for better or for worse.) Come richly together to celebrate bravery, escape, success, history, romance, you name it. And this Russian champagne *is* good and I am happy to have Katarzyna refill my glass.

"So tell me, George," she says. "How old are you and what brings you to Slovakia?"

"No, no, don't tell her," Franz says, "let me guess. You're forty-six."

"I was forty-six eight years ago," I tell him, "thanks." Then to his mother: "I lived in Warsaw before the revolution and wanted to come back to eastern Europe to see how things are going. Also, my grandfather was born just over the mountains—in a Polish village called Ostrow. I'd like to see it."

"That is poor land in that part of Poland," she says, and resumes an intimacy with her glass.

"Well, well," says Rudy. "I have Polish roots too. Same connection, my grandfather, and in many ways that's why I took a job in Warsaw." He raises his glass to me, "*Na zdrowie!*"

We drink to our Polish grandfathers.

"So what's it like," I say, "practicing psychiatry in Warsaw?"

"Psychiatry?"

"Aren't you a shrink?"

"No, no," he laughs, "I'm a banker."

THE LIGHTS—a magnificence of them—suddenly come on in the ceiling of the Grand Hotel Praha's central room, where the musicians have assembled to help us keep time at this historic dance, and where the grand old mirrors all around allow Katarzyna to look up and see, at any moment, how we,



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and she, in the wavy reflection, are doing. This is her element as truly as water is for a fish, indeed she is almost floating in the chandelier's shimmering light, floating and bouncing at the same time if that is possible, and of course it is! Anything and everything is possible! You can even lose and win simultaneously, no? "Yes, I am poor as a church mouse," our beauty says, "but I am on fire with happiness." Nadia says, "When I am in Vienna, sitting on my bench, I can tell you exactly who lives there and who does not, from the shopping bags they carry." Rudy says, "I have lived in nine countries abroad and except for Poland I've picked up the local language within six months. I think Katarzyna has made me lazy." "But I am worth it, my angel, am I not?" "Yes," he says, "I'm not even running as much as I used to. I'd get up at five o'clock and put in ten miles almost every day—at least ten miles. But now," he smiles at her, "look at me." "I am looking, my angel." "And if they don't carry a shopping bag," Nadia says, "I can tell from the look in their eyes. It's just like mine."

Only a prying bore would ask Katarzyna about the spaces, the distances, between the glittering snapshots. Only a wise guy would want to know how she gets from here to there while keeping her hair so neatly in place. I did say though, thanks to that excellent champagne, "Well, since you asked me, let me ask how old *you* are."

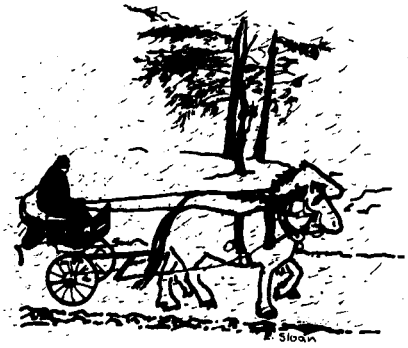
She looks at her son, then at Rudy, and finally at me and says, "Forty-six." That popular number seems about right, and I nod, and for an instant I think she wants to hit me. But she cuts her eyes to Lizzie, "And you, ah—"

"Elizabeth," Franz helps her.

"Yes, of course," she says. "How old are *you*, Elizabeth?"

Lizzie tells her—thirty-eight—and then Katarzyna says to Rudy, "I would like to dance now."

IT IS SO COLD WALKING to Midnight Mass that the snow squeaks when we step on it. To our left the dark hills and the dark mountain beyond them are one and where the mountain stops the toss of brilliant stars begins and down close beside us we can see the icy Biela River in the moonlight and hear it moving. All of this I think as we walk in the squeaky snow is a perfect illustration of where everything should be. We make out other walkers on the road, at first only a couple here, a couple there, old women arm in arm, we see, as we pass them: small women in big boots and babushkas huddled down against themselves and against the cold. As we approach the center of the village, more huddled shapes come into the road, old and young, dozens of them now, and all of us ascending the hill among murmurs of greeting, the smoke of our breath, to the white building where they are singing.



Inside it's packed near the entrance and I think we'll have to stand, but then I remember how it is on the buses in Slovakia—if people get inside the door, somehow that's good enough—so I ease through this crowd, pulling Lizzie with me, and sure enough, way up front there is a pew for us. The singing has stopped and now a communal saying of the rosary begins. We can see our breath, see everyone's breath. We can also see, flanking the altar, two scrawny pine trees strung with lights that blink on and off like displays in a department store, red, yellow, blue they blink, according to a fixed pattern, making everything around the altar look cheap and gaudy, 1950s dime store, basement rec room in the American suburbs. Put a couple of bubbling beer displays up there and they'd look right at home. It occurs to me that the trees are almost without needles by design, to better show off the precision of the blinking pattern. But the Slovaks must think the lights are beautiful, a release into glory after years of darkness.

I should leave. I'm too angry to be there. When the acolyte comes out to light the candles I want him to light hundreds, thousands, not stop at a puny six; I want warmth, real fire, at least the smell of wax—beeswax, tallow, a melting down, joinery; I want to make a speech to the congregation: those god damn blinking lights don't belong in here!

But I stay, of course, and something happens, something I have never seen before: at Communion time the men go up first, beginning with the oldest grandfather and ending with the smallest boy, one long line representing perhaps the span of a century, white-bearded at the front, pink-faced at the back; and then after the last boy, standing right behind him, is an old woman not much taller than he is who may be well over a hundred and is assisted as she hobbles up the aisle by hands reaching out from the pews along the way, and walking behind her are Zdiar's other old women who one by one become younger as they approach the priest. No one that I can see has arranged this order; it has been got up by the villagers themselves on the spot and without discussion, and whatever it means, if it means anything at all beyond a vivid ordering of time, it seems as powerful as the light which will rise in the east tomorrow, to give us what it gives. The blinking lights are gone. They have slipped away, and I do not think about them until a week later when we all rise to watch a clock hung with balloons—and when a fading Polish beauty will ask for two 500 crown notes from her banker, one to tuck in her son's blazer pocket, the other between her breasts. "If you do this on New Year's Eve, on the stroke of midnight," she says, "you will never be poor." Then she laughs—at the ritual? herself?—holding nothing back. And still laughing she embraces her angel, waiting for the proper moment to kiss him. □



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# Fit to Live

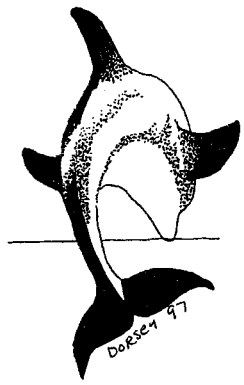
MICHAEL DWAYNE BLACKWELL

*Martyrs: Contemporary Writers on Modern Lives of Faith,* ed., Susan Bergman. HarperCollins. $23.00

"IF A PERSON HAS NOT found something for which to die, that person is not fit to live." Such is a maxim Martin Luther King, Jr., used to repeat quite often until his death by assassination. Susan Bergman, feeling the call to lift up and to get a sense of why a number of figures in the twentieth century have put their lives on the line because of their abiding religious faith and commitment to just causes, has assembled twenty accomplished authors—each of whom seeks to capture the mood and motivation of an individual, or group, struck down in the course of fighting against perceived injustices. The focus of the book is upon Christian witnesses, an unnecessary but understandable restriction given the plethora of persons felled for socioeconomic and political reasons during this century. *Martyrs* is an excellent way to reflect upon the past at the brink of a new century and to search for our own *raisons d'être.*

It is fitting that the introductory chapter is a meditation by Bergman in which she wrestles with the meaning and purpose of life—of how one is to dispose oneself in light of belief in a crucified and resurrected Lord as well as in the realization of one's own mortality. In a very real sense, however, as she grapples with dilemmas of comportment, she is also able to demonstrate the connectedness we humans have with each other, the empathy we can all summon, and the visceral impulsion to serve others which our conscious selves masterfully overrule. Even if one does not search for or find oneself serendipitously (for goodness's sake!) in the midst of tyranny or repression, Bergman avers, there is a need to ascertain what it means daily to deny oneself, take up one's cross, and be a disciple of Christ Jesus. She states: "No one is demanding that I deny what I believe; but have I denied myself—living within conditions of privilege and safety that much of the world has never known—and taken up my cross, daily, in order to follow Christ?"

The life of Simone Weil, as discussed by Anthony Walton, echoes this perspective and challenges the reader to transcend lives of comfortability and contentment. Weil, not a martyr in the classical sense, chose to identify with the poor and disinherited by living simply, opposing the tyrannies of Franco and Hitler, toiling with manual laborers, and eating scarcely. Suffering from tuberculosis and contracting a digestive disorder, Weil died not by the sword but from a weakened immune and respiratory system. Some have claimed that Weil "starved herself to death," Walton notes, but the matter of the ambiguity between suicide and martyrdom is never discussed. Walton, like Weil, ends by challenging readers who would be Christian to fight against indifference to the cries of the indigent and dispossessed.




Giants of recent human history, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Marilynne Robinson), Oscar Romero (Carolyn Forché), Edith Stein (Patricia Hampl), Steve Biko (Paul Elie), Maximillian Kolbe (Paul Mariani), the Jesuit priests (Ron Hansen) murdered in El Salvador, and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Gerald Early), are juxtaposed alongside lesser known figures such as Janani Luwum, Etty Hillesum, Osip Mandelstam, and Maria Goretti. Although each author seeks to make sense out of lives of remarkable conviction and tragic endings—a pursuit that ties the book together—each story is splendidly unique and differently articulated.

For example, Nancy Mairs brings into her discussion of the murder of Roman Catholic archbishop Janani Luwum, at the hands of Ugandan dictator Idi Amin, the fact that she sits in a wheelchair and warmly extends her heart to Africa, where her daughter worked as a Peace Corps volunteer in Zaire. Reflecting upon the stations of the Cross and the execution of Luwum, she realizes "Jesus' death was not a finite event. . . .Each one of us may be called upon to reenact it. . .for the sake of God's simple but stringent law: that we love God and one another," and finds herself, like all of us, wanting. Nevertheless, she is encouraged by Janani's sacrifice and discovers an eerie comfort: "If I must mount [the cross], he assures me, I will not do so alone."

In "A Cloud of Witnesses," Steve Saint tells of the death of his father, Nate Saint, and four other men who had a "burning desire" to share their faith with the Huaorani people in the jungle of Ecuador. Grisly as it might seem to us, Steve grew up in Quito, Ecuador, in the company of the people who



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had speared the five missionaries, including his father. Unlike Walton's presentation, Steve's essay ponders what appears to have been an unwillingness by the missionaries to use the Western firepower they possessed against the primitive spears of the *Aucas* (Huaorani for *savages*). The answer, though scarcely discussed at any length, has much to do with "another man, Jesus, who freely allowed his own death to benefit all people." Nate Saint, Steve asserts, albeit dying for his faith, left his children the legacy of "his willingness first to live for his faith" in obedience to God.

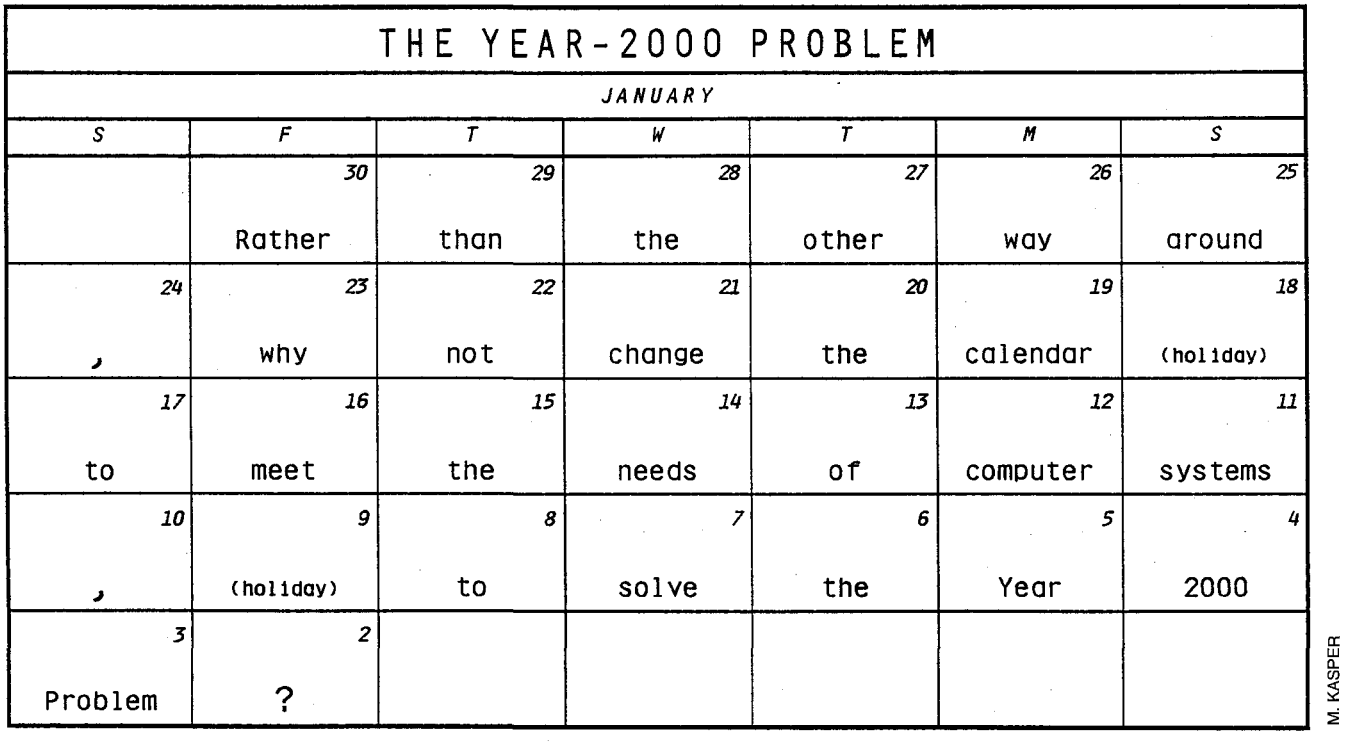
It is not surprising that many of the situations described in Bergman's *Martyrs* have warfare as a backdrop—given this century's advances in military technology via aircraft carriers, atomic bombs, laser pinpoint accuracy, computer chips, and space satellites. Riddled by violence, this century has witnessed casualties of horrific dimensions, and one book cannot do justice to the numbers of men and women sacrificed for having the courage of their convictions. From the gift of a martyred couple's love during the Boxer Rebellion (Barbara Lazear Ascher) to Etty Hillesum (Calvin Bedient), whose wartime diaries were more elaborate and spiritual than those of Anne Frank's; from Stein to Bonhoeffer, from Biko to King, from Charles Foucauld (Robert Ellsberg), a humble Catholic missionary killed in the desert of Algeria, to Romero, the rhythm of the twentieth century has been fiercely interrupted, ironically, by the screaming blood of those who sought to establish justice and peace in the land.

It is likewise understandable why two who penned and uttered poetry could be regarded as persons to eliminate, for poetry has a way of reaching the deepest parts of our being and in revealing truths and righteousness ordinary prose renders ineffable. From Mandelstam's "The Stalin Epigram" to Yeats's wonderment over Patrick Pearse, an Irish person executed for treason while fighting for emancipation from British oppression, the quizzical nature of martyrdom and the power it generates continue to beat as the juggernaut of sin imposes itself upon countless situations.

As a pacifist, I am torn concerning Pearse's turn to the brutality of rebellion, but Peggy O'Brien makes clear in "Poetry, the Body, and Violence," that Pearse's self-sacrifice can be interpreted as deeply spiritual and can engender a cathartic moment for those who share a more orthodox level of faith. O'Brien says, "Pearse intended his death to be an indivisible, eloquent gesture resisting deconstruction, even literal translation"—a position shared by Mandelstam who, according to Mark Rudman, considered poetry a way in "a sense of addressing someone intimately yet from a distance." Mandelstam, who published three volumes of poetry, was sentenced to hard labor and died in a Russian concentration camp of heart failure.

READING THE STORIES of martyred souls in Bergman's text lends itself to hagiography—so impressive are the lives of the figures graphed, one cannot help but be inclined to render uncritical acclaim to each of them. However, the stories are well crafted to bring out some of the internal conflicts with which the personages had to deal, thus avoiding the trap of facile glorification.

Kathleen Norris mentions the debate over the canonization of Maria Goretti as a saint in the Roman Catholic church. Exploitation at its finest, Goretti was


THE YEAR-2000 PROBLEM
JANUARY
S F T W T M S
30 29 28 27 26 25
Rather than the other way around
24 23 22 21 20 19 18
, why not change the calendar (holiday)
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, (holiday) to solve the Year 2000
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dubbed a "martyr of purity" by Pope Pius XII as a way to reposit the virtue of maintaining one's virginity and keeping chaste despite temptations to the contrary. Goretti was fatally stabbed during an attempted rape in 1902. Her beatification was in 1947, when, according to Norris, Roman Catholicism "needed a saint who could promote traditional values to teenagers and their parents in the wake of postwar modernism."

Like references to King, allusions to Goretti are historically utilitarian in nature: she became and remains an instrument for causes unrelated to her conscious thought or action. Goretti was an illiterate Italian peasant from a rural village. Reminiscent of one of Jesus's so-called *seven last words,* Norris divulges the crux of Goretti's "sanctity": as she lay dying, Maria supposedly "forgave her assailant and expressed the desire to see him in paradise." It is claimed that the murderer reported Maria declared to him: "No, it's a sin! God does not want it!"

The innocence we find in the story of Goretti's death is also present in the murder of the Mirabal sisters by the secret police of Trujillo's regime in the Dominican Republic. Julia Alvarez, in "Chasing the Butterflies," laments that her parents chose to flee from the trauma there while the Mirabal sisters opposed the tyranny with their husbands and wound up sacrificing their own lives. Subsequently, she returns to her homeland to investigate the story, since she was a baby in 1960 when the assassinations of the sisters occurred. Perhaps it is her desire to capture something of the strength, courage, and power of spirit the martyrdom of the three girls can bequeath.

Reflections on the twentieth century reveal to Dana Gioia, author of the Afterword, entitled "To Witness Truth Uncompromised," that "moral progress is neither linear nor inevitable," and that the virtues of "courage and sanctity are no safeguards against oblivion." Countless individuals unnamed in this finite text must not be forgotten beside the perpetrators of evil easily remembered by us all, such as Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, Amin, Duvalier, and so forth. We must remember those whose only "offense was moral resistance" by refusing to bow down to evil. Unfortunately, most do remain "nameless and numberless." Gioia cannot help but add some names briefly to the ones in the text because of some internally resonating connection that tends to detract somewhat from the force of an understandably limited collection.

The task of the martyr, i.e., "witness," is "to witness the truth uncompromised," we are told. While being a very violent and devastatingly destructive century, which includes the axing of the discerning, gentle soul, Aleksandr Menn (Larry Woiwode), a Russian Orthodox priest born into a Jewish household, Gioia adds that the lives, convictions, deaths, and remembrances (by us) of these figures have a curative quality. And we must continue to share the stories of martyrs, in the hope that we will learn from the sins of the past and march forward to the bright daybreak of freedom, justice, love, and peace.

*MARTYRS* TAKES THE BOLD STEP of presenting heroes and heroines of recent times who shared the Christian faith in various ways. It is a book which can pierce the hearts of people, regardless of their backgrounds or social, political, economic, and cultural orientations. Martyrdom will always be fraught with mystery, controversy, and intrigue, but it will also continue to penetrate the deep recesses of our humanity and call us to the task of learning from our past, lest we find ourselves condemned to repeat it. *Martyrs,* despite its singularly Christian base and lack of a comparative framework, is not mere hagiography; it serves as a refreshing step towards comprehending what it means truly to live. □



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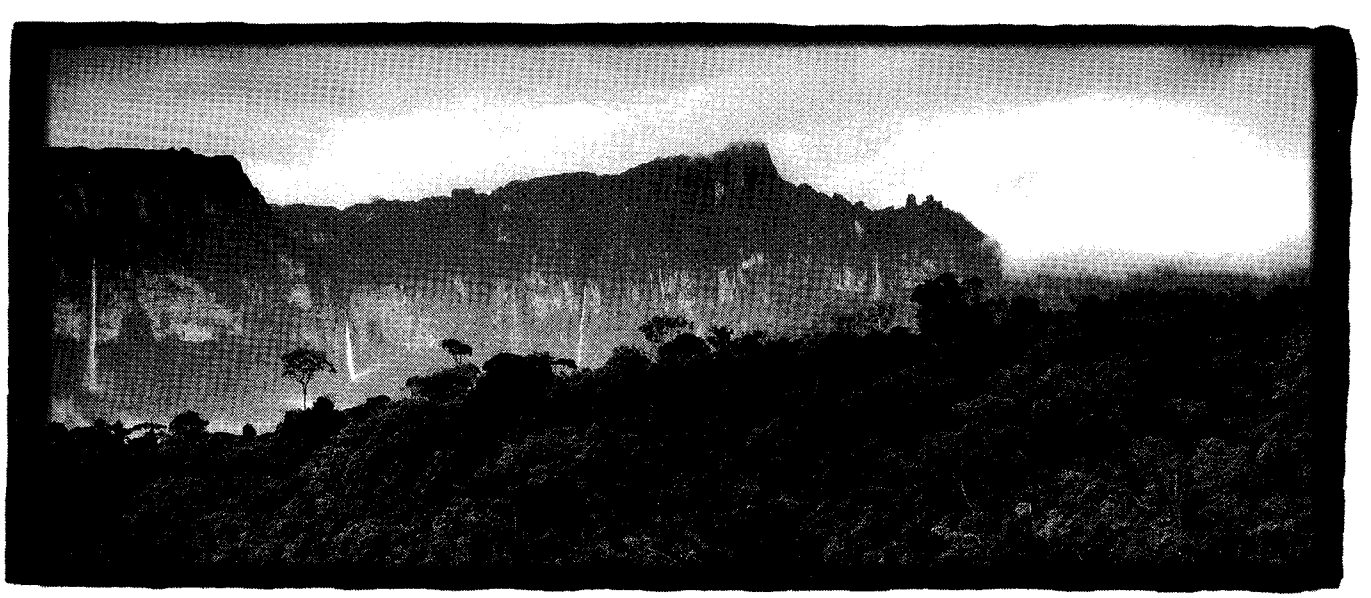

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